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“De Manhattan Pa El Bronx:”

Dembow as the Sound of dominicanidad Ausente

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Swarthmore College

May 2023

Al pertenecer aquí a un grupo étnico marginal, con respecto al sector dominante en la sociedad, he tenido que asumir la nacionalidad como conciencia y estandarte, lo que no creo habría ocurrido de haberme quedado en el suelo natal. Aquí lo dominicano es algo que estudio, que defiendo, que enarbolo y que intentó preservar porque pienso que en eso reside una fuente imprescindible de fortaleza espiritual para librar mi batalla por la vida por estos lares...la experiencia emigratoria que me ha alejado espacialmente del suelo natal, me ha acercado espiritualmente a la dominicanidad como principio de identidad.

Me ha hecho más dominicano.

*(Belonging to a marginalized ethnic group here, with respect to the dominant sector of society, I have had to assume my nationality as a conscience and standard, something that I believe never would have happened had I stayed in my native land. Here the Dominican is something that I study, something I defend, uplift and intent to preserve because I believe that within it resides an essential fountain of spiritual strength to liberate my battle for life in these places...the emigration experience that has distanced me spatially from my native land, had brought me closer spiritually to the dominicanidad as a principle identity. **It has made me more Dominican.**)*

Silvio Torres-Saillant¹

¹ Torres-Saillant, "El concepto de la dominicanidad y la Migración," El retorno de las yolas.

Abstract

This research project begins with the question, what is the role of music in the lives and identities of contemporary Dominicanyorkers? As a Dominicanyorker and a student of sociology, this project begins from the embodied knowledge that Dembow music is actively doing something important in relation to how Dominican migrants and their descendants navigate their Dominican identity and belonging in present-day New York City. I claim that Dembow is the sound of a particular urban condition of diasporic identities, what I call following Dominican studies, “dominicanidad ausente.” To fully understand the role of music in identity development, I use ethnographic research, including interviews, and media content analysis to analyze how urban Dominican sonic practices reconstruct and expand dominicanidad as worldmaking separate from the Dominican Republic. I build upon Lorgia García Peña’s conceptual work to show that dominicanidad ausente is the historical condition of Dominican diasporic identity/identification defined at once by the position of both (1) experiencing one’s Dominican identity always in relation with the yearning to return to the Dominican Republic, while (2) actively asserting one’s belonging to a diasporic community in the present and future. This is an investigation on the influence of Dembow music, analyzed through the conditions of contemporary urban dominicanidad ausente.

Este proyecto de investigación comienza con la pregunta, ¿cuál es el papel de la música en las vidas e identidades de los dominicanyoles contemporáneos? Como dominicanyol y estudiante de sociología, este proyecto parte del conocimiento de que la música del Dembow está haciendo algo importante en relación con la forma en que los emigrantes dominicanos y sus

descendientes navegan su identidad dominicana y su pertenencia a la actual ciudad de Nueva York. Afirmo que Dembow es el sonido de una condición urbana particular de las identidades diaspóricas, lo que yo llamo siguiendo los estudios dominicanos, ‘dominicanidad ausente.’ Para comprender plenamente el papel de la música en el desarrollo de la identidad, utilizo la investigación etnográfica, incluyendo entrevistas, y el análisis del contenido de los medios de comunicación para analizar cómo las prácticas sónicas urbanas dominicanas reconstruyen y expanden la dominicanidad como creación de mundo separada de la República Dominicana. Me baso en el trabajo conceptual de la Dr. Lorgia García Peña para mostrar que la dominicanidad ausente es la condición histórica de la identidad y identificación de la diáspora dominicana definida a la vez por la posición de (1) experimentar la propia identidad dominicana siempre en relación con el anhelo y deseo de regresar a la República Dominicana, mientras (2) se afirma activamente la propia pertenencia a una comunidad diaspórica en el presente y en el futuro.² Este trabajo se trata de una investigación sobre la influencia de la música de Dembow, analizada a través de las condiciones de la dominicanidad urbana contemporánea ausente.

² Traducción realizada con la versión gratuita del traductor www.DeepL.com/Translator

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First and foremost, thank you to my ancestors for nurturing my past, present and future! (Amen.) Thank you to God, the orishas, the lwas and the saints for your guidance and protection while completing this work. #spiritualistabae

¡DE LO MIO! Thank you to my family members for your contributions to this project. Thank you for motivating me and being proud of me, it always means the world to me. ¡PATRIA, LA MAMA MIA! Como dice Bulin 47, I have to shoutout my mother first for being my mother and for being the woman she is. Thank you Mami for allowing me to radicalize you some more, and for teaching me how to have a knife for a tongue. To my father, Sergio, for showing me that community care is truly self-care. Even though my dad just learned what I've been studying for the past four years, he never once criticized me. He encouraged and empowered me. Gracias, pa!

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To the illustrious CUNY Dominican Studies Institute at The City College of New York...from the bottom of my heart I am deeply grateful for the important work you all do every day. My relationship to dominicanidad has been informed by the Dominican Studies Library and

³ The song for this section is "Joseador-Remix" by Bulin 47 and Chapa La Voz Del Patio. This song has motivated me to finish chapters and start sentences on the hardest days! I am super grateful for this song, as well as the others found in this playlist "[Alta Gama Espiritual](#)." Shoutout to all the dembow, Bronx Drill, House music, and Jersey Club music that I listened to while writing this project. Music is life!

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YEEERRRRR!!!

Shout out to the Heights! Big up the Bronx! Where it all began. I am proud to be a Dominican and to have had the privilege to grow up in such a unique environment like New York City. As A Boogie said, we was “steppin’ over puddles full of rain” in the concrete jungle. Being in PA has given me the time and space to reflect on my life experiences, and to make build healthier relationships with my environment. Shout out to the buses for lulling me to sleep. Shoutout to the 1 and A train for taking me everywhere I need to go. And shoutout to the Greyhound and Peter Pan buses for getting me to Philly and back.

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It has truly taken a village to get here, and I’m not even done!

Introduction: How this project came to be

1. Vignette

Over the past few years, summer in the Heights is defined by Dembow, every year a new song becomes the defining sound of the season. Besides the infectious beats blasting from cars racing down my street, what stood out to me the most is that all made reference to Dominican urban places in DR and NYC. “De Manhattan para el Bronx, de Manhattan para el Bronx” (from Manhattan to the Bronx, from Manhattan to the Bronx) sang artist El Cherry Scm in his song with Bronx-Dominican Dowba Montana in their joint hit (you guessed it) “De Manhattan Pa El Bronx.” Given that El Cherry has never been to New York City, I became curious about how he was able to sing about these Dominican spaces in NYC and succeed in capturing their vibes. The music video takes place in both NYC and Santo Domingo, DR—the capitals of Dominican urban life.

This project is titled after this song because it reflects Dominican urban life, and its large influence over dominicanidad. I start with this song to start with the important questions its popularity raises: How does this song create an imaginary of Uptown Manhattan and the Bronx when the artist doesn’t intimately know the place he is writing about? Does the collaboration with Bronx native Dowba Montana make the chorus more authentic and relatable to diasporic Dominicans? Without El Cherry on the song, do Dominicans in DR interact with migrants and migration enough to imagine these named places as Dominican as they are?

In this thesis I argue that the answer to these questions involves an understanding of dominicanidad conditioned beyond the DR and within the diasporic communities that continue to

influence and expand the future possibilities of Dominicans widely. As I elaborate in the following chapters, this song embodied and celebrated a significant form of dominicanidad ausente that resonated widely amongst Dominicans on the island and in NYC.

Dembow music, the love child of dancehall riddim and reggaeton, is both a Caribbean medley and uniquely Dominican creation. As a scholar of Sociology and Black Studies, and a Dominicanyorker, the present and future of Dembow music excites me.⁴ It deserves to be uplifted and recognized for the possibilities it present for how Dominican people articulate their identity and identification. More so, since there isn't much academic research focused on Dembow and its impact, in this project I am challenging myself to investigate this genre and analyze the ways it generatively continues to shape daily life for Dominicans through their constructions and expressions of dominicanidad.

To be able to really explore and analyze the role of Dembow music in Washington Heights and the Bronx, in the summer of 2022 I interned at the City University of New York's Dominican Studies Institute at the City College of New York (the DSI) as an undergraduate research intern to investigate the relationship between dominicanidad ausente, transnational identity development, and Dembow music.

⁴ Dominicanyorker is the English translation of 'Dominicanyol,' the Spanish term colloquially used to refer to Dominican migrants and their descendants in the US. While the history of the term will prove that it has a negative connotation, contemporary Dominicans living in NYC take pride in the term. It used to be used to make reference to poor, Black, working-class Dominicans in the U.S. It was often a criminalizing term, making reference to Dominicans who would travel to participate in the drug trade with gang-affiliations. These days, some Dominican elites might use it with a condescending tone, but their insults no longer stain the term. Dominican migrants and their descendants now use the term to represent the strength of their transnational identity.

2. Literature Review

In the fall of 2021 I completed a book review project in my Introduction to Black Studies class that gave me the opportunity to read and analyze Lorgia García Peña’s “The Borders of Dominicanidad.” Dr. García Peña’s work concerns “the ways in which antiblackness and xenophobia intersect the Global North producing categories of exclusion that lead to violence and erasure.⁵” As a scholar of Dominican Studies, García Peña’s work is critical of the traditional archives used to define Dominican culture and identity by highlighting the narratives and contributions of silenced people and lived realities.⁶ Since then, her writing style and theorization have really stuck with me. García Peña’s framework of deconstructing to *remember* has taught me to read beyond the records, and to understand Dominicanidad and Dominican history in relation to the colonial and imperial encounters that continue to shape the lives of all Dominicans and Haitians. Specifically, the following concepts have influenced my approach to this project and the research for it:

dominicanidad: I employ the term as a theoretical category that refers to both the people who embrace the label “Dominican” whether or not they are considered Dominican citizens by the state (such as diasporic Dominicans and ethnic Haitians) and the history, cultures, and institutions associated with them. I opt to keep the Spanish- language spelling to avoid confusion with capitalized Dominicanidad, which refers to hegemonic and official institutions of state control.⁷

As we can see from this quote, García Peña begins with a conceptual differentiation. By defining lower-case *dominicanidad* (Dominicanness) to include the wider experience of people who self-identify as Dominican, she defines upper-case *Dominicanidad* as the cultural product of

⁵ Lorgia García Peña, “About,” <https://www.lorgiagarciapena.com/about>.

⁶ Her works: “The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation and the Archives of Contradiction,” “Bordes de la dominicanidad,” “Community As Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color,” and “Translating Blackness: Latinx Colonialities in Global Perspective.”

⁷ García Peña, “Note On Terminology,” *The Borders of Dominicanidad*.

the nation-state project/agenda. I will continue to use (lower-cased) *dominicanidad* to reference the histories and embodiments that exist in contrast to *Dominicanidad*. This tension allows for the *remembering* of cultural archives that Dr. Lorgia García Peña’s work strives for. It is important that I center marginalized Dominicans (including ethnic Haitian and diasporic Dominicans) to ground my work in the transborder spaces which Dominicans occupy and navigate. Dominican transnationalism in New York City is grounded in this tension between belonging and exclusion at the hands of national agendas; it is this navigation that shapes the sonic practices that I will investigate.

In the “Notes On Terminology” section, García Peña defines her key racial and ethnic identity terms to ground her theorization of Dominican history, culture and identity in the lived realities of all self-identifying Dominicans rather than the hegemonic narratives rooted in anti-haitianism and anti-blackness. In this project I borrow her terminology and ground them in the context of Dominicanyorker sonic practices that I aim to investigate. I present the following definitions—in conversation with García Peña—to offer a guide for understanding Dominicanyorkers outside of the gaze and hold of the Dominican national agenda.

dominican: Following Lorgia García Peña, in contrast to *Dominicanidad*, *dominicans* are self-identified regardless of their citizenship status, ethnic and national background, race, sexuality, religious background, and diasporic position. I will not use the lowercase ‘dominicans,’ instead this serves as the reference for lower-cased *dominicanidad*.

Dominicanyorker (Dominicanyol): “Working-class Dominican migrants and their descendants

who live in United States urban Dominican enclaves⁸.” I will expand García’s definition and make it particular to self-identified Dominicans living in Washington Heights/Uptown.

Washington Heights (Uptown): Made into a Hollywood renown neighborhood by Lin-Manuel Miranda's hit Broadway musical, *In The Heights*, Washington Heights is the center of Dominican cultural and political life in the United States. The Heights is located between 154th and 200th Street in Uptown Manhattan. However, colloquially, Inwood and Western Bronx neighborhoods are included when “Uptown” is referenced in relation to Dominicans. It is important to include the Bronx in the study of Washington Heights because most Dominicans in New York City reside in the Bronx, even if they promote Uptown Manhattan as the largest Dominican enclave. I will refer to these Dominican spaces in the city as Washington Heights and Uptown; including Inwood, Dyckman Avenue, and the borough of the Bronx.

Dembow: The love child of Jamaican Dancehall riddims, Panamanian and Puerto Rican reggaeton, and Dominican culture, Dembow is the emblematic musical genre of this generation of Dominican Yorkers. Such as myself, whose relation to dominicanidad has been defined by “musica urbana⁹” in contrast to more classic Dominican genres such as Bachata and Merengue. Dembow is an urban sonic construction born in the bajo mundo¹⁰ of the ghettoized neighborhoods in Santo Domingo, República Dominicana. Dembow, I am claiming, is the sonic expression of dominicanidad that seeks to transcend borders and expand the possibilities within the identity.

⁸ Often times, other metropolitan areas in the Northeast of the United States are considered in relation to New York City, and thus a Dominican from Providence, Rhode Island is also a Dominican Yorker.

⁹ Translation: urban music. The Dominican Republic and Latin American classify this music genre, and Dembow, as urban music a part of the *la industria urbana* (The Urban Music Industry).

¹⁰ Translation: underworld. Synonyms: barrio, hoods. See page 83 for my definition.

Bodega: The iconic emplacement of Dominicaniyorker soundscapes, a bodega is a small corner store generally known as a Grocery Store, Corner Store and/or Deli Grocery. I understand it as an iconic emplacement of Dominicanyorker sounds because the Dominican owners and workers purposely reproduce sonic practices and music the same way they would in the Dominican Republic. The Bodega's aim is to bring diasporic Dominican's access to Dominican products, culture and encounters. Most non-Dominicans identify Bodegas as Dominican spaces by the music and Dominican accents in the soundscape.

Sonic Practices: A fancy way of talking about sound. I am aiming to conceptualize music as part of a bigger realm of production of sound as knowledge and lived experience that shape identity in Dominican spaces in New York City.

Dominican Diasporic Transnationalism: LGP asserts that there is a wound in Dominican identity embodied by (1) the border the Dominican Republic shares with Haiti, and (2) the border the Dominican Republic shares with the United States. The condition of these two borders is essential to transnationalism, as it is essential to Dominican identity. Dominicanidad is defined by a type of transnationalism shaped and continuously defined by these two borders.¹¹ Making the Dominican migrant an embodiment of these two borders, situating Dominican

¹¹ Here, I am thinking *with* Lorgia and her work. At the end of "The Borders of Dominicanidad" Lorgia explores what rayano consciousness can offer to the Dominican diaspora's journey for recovering and relearning their history. Rayano references individuals who live on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, as well as individuals who have both Dominican and Haitian heritage. LGP says, "the practice of communal nursing—as a framework for understanding what I call rayano consciousness: the multiplicity of performative dictions that make up the transnational, interethnic, and multilinguistic borders of dominicanidad...my conceptualization of rayano consciousness remaps Hispaniola's borders on the historicized body of the Dominican racialized subject, bringing attention to the persistent violence of colonial presence, but also to multiple ways of contestations. Rayano consciousness offers the possibility of imagining the rayano body as a site for the performance of political contradiction." García Peña, "Rayano Consciousness: Remapping the Haiti-DR Border after the Earthquake of 2010," *The Borders of Dominicanidad*, page 133.

transnationalism within and outside of these two borders.

dominicanidad ausente: A historical condition of diasporic identity/identification defined by both a type of experience in relation to dominicanidad and the conceptual condition of being ausente (absent) through migration. It is the position of both (1) experiencing one's Dominican identity always in relation with the yearning to return, while (2) asserting one's belonging to a diasporic community abroad. The conditions of the nostalgic pull to the past (of dominicanidad), and an articulation of belonging to the present and future (of dominicanidad). I claim that dominicanidad ausente is a conditional relationship to the Dominican Republic in which the diaspora reconstructs and redefines who they are and want to be, in conversation with their heritage and futures. Asserting one's presence as a refusal to the past, and instead as belonging to diasporic communities in the present and future. I am not describing nostalgia, instead a dialectical relationship. Dominicanidad ausente is simultaneously the absence of Dominicanidad—allowing for one to define oneself *beyond* Dominicanidad—while also being defined by the longing for dominicanidad. This is not an identity, it is a condition of migration defined by the dialectical relationship between two forces.

These terms are key to my understanding of dominicanidad ausente, and what I will offer as the sound practices of urban dominicanidad ausente. It is through the history that shaped Dominicans from their movements to their identities, that we can understand their conditions and the positions as part of a larger consequence of global migration patterns. With this explanation for terminology, I begin to work against the archives and towards what I am analyzing as expansions of dominicanidad grounded in transnational collaboration.

In “The Borders of Dominicanidad,” she employs the analytical framework of

contradictions, aiming to present “stories, narratives and speech acts” as a way of interrupting “the hegemonic version of national identity and against the mode of analysis we tend to value as historically accurate or what most people call truth.¹²” This framework of contradictions puts language and diction against itself to recover and remember them suppressed knowledge and lived realities of the nation, the island, and the people and their bodies. In the process of reading against the grain, these interruptions of accepted “truths” as deeper contradictions between societal imaginaries and realities become historized into the archive of dominicanidad. Dr. Garcia Peña reconstructs foundational moments in Dominican history to reveal the hegemonic agenda that has formed and dominated the diction of archived events. She recovers history by discussing the historical omissions that work to construct a specific type of Dominicanidad; and in the process of recovery, she is able to expand the narratives of dominicanidad to illustrate the knowns, unknowns and how they were constructed.

García-Peña connects El Nié that rayanos (“people from the geographical area of the Haitian-Dominican borderland also known as the Línea Fronteriza”) live in, to the transborder experience of Dominican migrants (García-Peña, xi).¹³ Building off of Silvio Torres-Saillant’s contribution of the migrant as an exiled citizen, and Juan Bosch’s literature pioneering the poetics of dominicanidad ausente, El Nié is neither here nor there. It is a global position outside of the imagination of the nation-state, but within dominicanidad.

I was inspired to continue to investigate the complexities within dominicanidad ausente, and the unexpected influence and growth the Dominican diaspora has had on Dominican music and culture. I found myself thinking in relation to the Dembow song from that summer, how

¹² García Peña, “Introduction: Dominicanidad in *Contradiction*,” *The Borders of Dominicanidad*, page 02.

¹³ García Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad*.

dominicanidad ausente helped answer the questions I had about how music becomes a medium for transnational collaboration.

Through “The Borders of Dominicanidad” and the framework of contradictions, I learned more Dominican history than my parents ever taught me. It is in the process of *(re)membering*¹⁴—returning power and agency to bodies by reconstructing through its own lived realities—that the multiplicity of history and dominicanidad engage into conversation. Analyzing the archives process has allowed me to understand the past in the present because it is focused on the importance of reconstructing the agency and truths of our ancestors because they live within us—spiritually and physically. *Rememberance* is the embodiment of memory. Lorgia presents historical events, conditions, and diction as existing in the present through memory and the repeated experiences of poor, racialized, gendered, and marginalized bodies across generations. It is collective memory. And, she is also conceptualizing it as a re-ascription of agency to the bodies of those abandoned by the nation-state. *Rememberance* is both a putting back together of the body through buried truths, and a remembering of the erased and reconstructed past.

The lives of dominicanos ausentes are largely informed by the ways they imagine spaces to be before and after they interact with them. New York City is a common destination for many Dominican migrants because of what the space is associated with: financial prosperity, modernity and Dominican networks. I am interested in exploring *the imaginary* of these spaces, how they’re created and what they reproduce. The Dominican spaces in New York City are categorized by their large Dominican resident population, large amounts of Dominican

¹⁴ First she presents that history is constantly made through memory and repeated experiences that the body has cross time. It is collective memory. And, she is also conceptualizing it as a re-ascription of agency to the bodies of those abandoned by the nation-state. *Rememberance* is both a putting back together of the body through buried truths, and a remembering of the erased and reconstructed past.

businesses and employees in the area. Washington Heights is imagined as the center of Dominican life in New York City. While there is truth to the imaginary, most Dominicans in NYC live in the Bronx.¹⁵ The Bronx has become a part of the imagination of Washington Heights as the neighbor to the center of Dominican life and activity. Many Dembow songs have made it a point to mention the Bronx when citing places where “people get lit.”

As I mentioned earlier, I was brought to this project by my interest in Dembow songs that specifically mention Dominican spaces in New York. There is something unique about the relatability that Dembow music creates, and the places it mentions helps to build this medium of relatability. Some may simply label this transnationalism, but there is an active role that Dembow music and artists play in constructing the imaginaries of these Dominican spaces, both for domestic Dominicans and migrants.

Having lived in Washington Heights my whole life, the soundscape of the Heights is an intimate and political creation of my community. Within the soundscape of the Heights you will probably hear Dominican voices, Dominican music (Bachata, Salsa, Mambo), large traffic noises because of the nearby highways and cross-state and cross-borough bridges. And the city sounds like loud police and ambulance sirens, buses and cars. The most identifiable is the loud music playing from cars, within bodegas, and from speakers on the street/park. The sounds of the city are so intimate to me that the sounds of the buses at night have become a lullaby to me.

Dominican spaces are largely categorized by their sounds, so residents and commuters in these spaces must feel the impact this has on their lives. I would like to use this intimate

¹⁵ Little Dominican Republic, “About Us: Dominicanos en Nueva York,” <http://littledominicanrepublic.com/about.php>.

experience with sound that city residents have with their environments to investigate the role that sound has in determining our relationship with our environments.

3. Methodology

I began this investigation with these three questions:

1. How do Dominican Yorkers use Dembow to navigate and articulate their belonging to dominicanidad?
2. How can the concept of ‘dominicanidad ausente,’ and the framework of recovering histories through ‘*contradictions*’ expand our understanding of Dominican Yorkers?
3. How do Dominican Yorkers use sound and sonic knowledge to navigate and negotiate their positions in the city?

This investigation is primarily an inquiry of the impacts of Dembow music on the lives of Dominican Yorkers. In order to understand the sociopolitical position of Dominican migrants and their descendants, I begin by building upon Lorgia Garcia Peña’s understanding of dominicanidad ausente as the condition of Dominican diasporic identities and identifications defined at once by two forces. Dominican Yorkers experience their dominicanidad always in relation to a nostalgic yearning to return to the Dominican Republic; while actively asserting their belonging to an expansive and diverse diasporic community in the present, which constantly positions them in the future of Diasporic possibilities. With dominicanidad ausente, the sonic practices of Dominican Yorkers are always in conversation with their diasporic position. Sound is not apolitical, and it is not a neutral performance. My empirical evidence tells me that Dembow is offering something different to the younger generations of Dominicans than Bachata,

Mambo and Merengue cannot. I apply this claim to the reproductions of Dembow music in Uptown Manhattan and the Bronx, NY, to analyze the generative role of Dembow music in the negotiating, constructing and expanding dominicanidad to encapsulate the future possibilities of the Diaspora.

I begin this investigation by researching the concept of dominicanidad ausente and developing my own interpretations of what it can offer to contemporary Dominican Studies. At the same time, I am consuming Dembow music and culture in Washington Heights on the daily. Thus, my claim of the paradox of dominicanidad ausente is always in conversation with Dembow music and culture because that is where my understanding developed.

3.1 Interviews

I was born and raised in New York City, so I am a part of Dominican communities where music, identity politics, and migration are often in conversation. I used this network to recruit participants who are (1) at least 18 years-old, (2) self-identified Dominican, and (3) lived or have lived in New York City. These semi-scheduled interviews were held on zoom, at scheduled times for about 40-50 minutes. Since there were minimal risks to participating in the study, I decided verbal consent before and after the interview would be most fitting to allow them to control what information got used and/or discarded within the investigation. Each interview centered on 10 questions that aimed to (1) explore the development of their sonic knowledge, (2) the sound identity of their community(/ies), and (3) their relationship to Dembow music.¹⁶ I will now present some background on my participants, and some of the large contributions they have made to this study:

¹⁶ See Appendix for interview questions.

My first interviewee is Emilia (pseudonym). Emilia was born in NYC, moved to DR and then moved back to NYC where she mainly grew up in Harlem, New York. Since Emilia was my first interviewee our conversation was full of trial and error, but I was able to get a good sense of the role phatic labor and music has had on her life. And while Emilia is not an avid listener of Dembow music, she discusses her relationship with Dembow in detail. Having grown up with it, she has largely seen dominicanidad be reflected in Dembow music and the culture surrounding it.

Jasmine, my second interviewee, also expressed a very similar relationship to Dembow music. As an artist herself, Jasmine is able to appreciate Dembow for its dominicanness, its energetic riddims that allow you to escape into partying, and for how it parallels Hip Hop. Jasmine grew up in the Bronx, NYC largely surrounded by music. Born to Dominican parents, Jasmine cannot separate music from her understanding of dominicanidad because her parents' love for music and singing. However, she uses Dembow to highlight the generational differences within dominicanidad.

On a different note, Caroline spoke differently about her relationship to music. She tied it very closely to her environment since she lives near Dyckman Avenue, where the nightlife is categorized by Dembow and Reggaeton music. Caroline categorizes the physical changes in her neighborhood using the sonic shifts they created. In this interview, sonic knowledge was described as an essential tool for how she understood her environment

And lastly, my interview with Helena allowed us to dive into gender exploration within Dembow music. Helena discussed learning to define herself against a variety of sonic backgrounds: bachata and merengue at home, Hip-Hop subgenres at school, and Reggaeton and Dembow at Latinx parties. Helen emphasized that her attraction Dembow is linked to the

exploration of Dominican women's sexual desires and narratives that the music genre makes available in a culture that deems it taboo.

While these interviews aimed to understand the role of sound and music in navigating and negotiating city life, they lead to fruitful conversations on a variety of topics that I will return to throughout chapters 2 and 3.

3.2 Content and Media Analysis

I had the amazing opportunity to attend the American Musicological Society (AMS), Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM), and Society for Music Theory (SMT) Joint Annual Conference in New Orleans this year. Thank you to the Provost Office, the Dean's Office, the Educational Studies Department, the Black Studies Department and the Sociology and Anthropology Department for funding my trip. This conference presented me with the opportunity to understand the world of Musicology and Ethnomusicology directly from the academics in the field. The opportunity to observe many conferences greatly influenced how I have approached my discussion of sound and space.

A large portion of my investigation was based in analyzing Dembow songs, documentaries, and podcasts with Dembow artists. I watched several youtubers who analyze and review urban Dominican music and culture to contextualize viral Dembow songs. For some songs I did a line by line analysis, and others were used to evidence the function of Dembow song in transnational networks. In addition, I watched documentaries like Amazon Music's "La Cuna Del Dembow" to learn about the history of the genre, and how it is still developing into its own sound today.

4. Presenting the Research Study

Chapter 1 will lay the theoretical groundwork for the rest of this research project. I begin with my development of the research project with Professor Sarah Aponte at the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute. Then I begin my journey into theory by contextualizing Dominican migration motivations and experiences in the 20th century through Dominican Studies scholarship. I dive into the role of migration in the development of Dominican culture and citizenship to lay the groundwork for my new understanding of Lorgia García-Peña's definition of *dominicanidad* (*ausente*), lowercased. I claim that *dominicanidad ausente* is the cultural identity and production through which *dominicanes ausentes* (Dominican migrants and their descendants) navigate their belonging to and articulation of *dominicanidad*.

Chapter 2 is about sonic ways of knowing. I will introduce the sonic environments that Dominicanyorkers are surrounded by, and position them as spaces in which sound are produced, reproduced and controlled. Essential to this project is the study of sound as a composer of urban sociopolitical dynamics. The relationship Dominicanyorkers have to sound and place is constructed by the sound praxis that surrounds them, and their position within it. Their navigation of the sonic realm produces sonic knowledge that allows them to articulate their presence and belonging—both to Washington Heights and the Bronx, and to *dominicanidad*—through communicative channels developed by their phatic labor. It is through sonic practices that Dominicanyorkers continue to build a strong, transnational community in Washington Heights.

And last but not least, Chapter 3 is the role of Dembow music in the sonic construction of *dominicanidad ausente*. First, I begin with an explanation of the history Merengue and Bachata have as sounds of migrations. Second, I give a history of Dembow as a product of Caribbean

musical exchange that turned into an intimately Dominican construction. Dembow music is “musica urbana” making it an urban sonic construction that can hold the urban dominicanidad that Dominican migrants in NYC experience and reproduce, as well. Dominicanyorkers use music to navigate their realities, and articulate their belonging to the place and space they inhabit. They build community through their sonic communication infrastructures. This has made Dembow the sound identity of Dominican spaces in NYC. Through Dembow, many Dominicanyorkers articulate their belonging to Dominican lived realities, expanding the possibilities of dominicanidad ausente.

My goal with this project is to explore the influence Dembow music has on the lives of Dominicanyorkers. The need to study sound intersects with the large musical presence that Dominicans have used to map themselves onto the geography of Uptown Manhattan and the Bronx. It is these inquiries as to how this happens and what these processes of sonic articulation can offer us that drive this research.

Chapter 1:

Towards a New Understanding of “dominicanidad Ausente”

...la dominicanidad sobrevive la separación del suelo hasta por generaciones. De ahí nos atrevemos a afirmar que una criatura nacida en una familia dominicana en la ciudad de Nueva York, por ejemplo, no pierde el justo reclamo a la dominicanidad por solo haber nacido fuera de los contornos del mapa nacional.¹⁷

Silvio Torres-Saillant

El retorno de las yolas

This chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for the rest of this research project. I open with my development of the project through conversations with Professor Sarah Aponte at the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute. Then I begin my journey into theory by contextualizing Dominican migration, motivations and experiences in the 20th century through Dominican Studies scholarship. I dive into the role of migration in the development of Dominican culture and citizenship to lay the groundwork for my new understanding of Lorgia García-Peña’s definition of *dominicanidad* (ausente), lowercased. I claim that *dominicanidad ausente* is a particular urban condition of diasporic identities through which Dominican migrants and their

¹⁷ Translation: “...dominicanness survives geographic separation for generations. From there we dare to affirm that a child born in a Dominican family in New York, for example, does not lose their just claim to Dominicanness only because they were born outside of the borders of the national map.” Torres-Saillant, “El concepto de la dominicanidad y la emigración,” *El retorno de las yolas*, page 134.

descendants navigate their belonging to and articulation of dominicanidad beyond the Dominican Republic.

1. First, A Cross-Generational Conversation

While interning¹⁸ at the CUNY Dominican Studies Institution at the City College of New York (CUNY DSI at CCNY)¹⁹ in the summer of 2022, I had the opportunity to exchange ideas and resources with Professor Sarah Aponte, the Chief Librarian who founded the Dominican Library at CUNY back in 1994. The CUNY DSI is the first and only institution in the United States dedicated to the study of Dominican people and the Dominican Republic. Scholars, artists, and individuals in a wide range of fields have utilized and contributed to the library, archive and scholarship at the DSI for their own personal research, to inform their work on the conditions of Dominican people in the Dominican Republic and abroad. It is in this environment that I intentionally began to develop the research proposal for my SOAN Senior Research Project.

Professor Aponte is one of those Dominican women that right off the bat feel like they could be your aunt.²⁰ Her friendliness and eagerness to discuss Dominican Scholarship and the Archives was infectious and exciting. When I decided to discuss my project proposal with her, I

¹⁸ I've had the wonderful opportunity to intern at the DSI twice. Each research internship opportunity was different, and very formative for me as a scholar, a researcher and as a child of Dominican immigrants. This work is deeply informed by the lessons I learned, the conversations I had, and the research I conducted with the DSI.

¹⁹ From the Dominican Blue Book: "Founded in 1992 and housed at The City College of New York, the Dominican Studies Institute of the City University of New York (CUNY DSI) is the nation's first, university-based research institute devoted to the study of people of Dominican descent in the United States and other parts of the world. CUNY DSI's mission is to produce and disseminate research and scholarship about Dominicans, and about the Dominican Republic itself. The Institute houses the Dominican Archives and the Dominican Library, the first and only institutions in the United States collecting primary and secondary source material about Dominicans. CUNY DSI is the locus for a community of scholars, including doctoral fellows, in the field of Dominican Studies, and sponsors multidisciplinary research projects. The Institute organizes lectures, conferences, and exhibitions that are open to the public."

²⁰ I want to take a moment to exclaim how important Dr. Aponte is to myself and to the Dominican diaspora. She is the first Dominican librarian I have ever met! And she is the founder of the library that has informed all the literature I read about Dominicans and Dominican-Americans. Without her, my understanding of myself and my dominicanidad would be very different; and this investigation wouldn't be possible. I am very grateful to all her hard work, passion and dedication.

wasn't sure what I would ask her but I was thrilled to get the chance to talk to her one-on-one. Walking up to her office, she welcomed me with an excited smile and greeted me by name. I began by introducing myself and my excitement to converse with her. She asked me what I was interested in researching and learning more about at the DSI, and I told her that I had just read Lorgia's latest book, *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction*, and was left with questions about some concepts she used that I hadn't encountered before; mainly, 'dominicanos ausentes' and 'dominicanidad ausente.' I was having trouble researching the origins and usages of these terms and I asked her for guidance on how to engage with the Dominican library and archives available at the DSI.

Librarian Aponte looked at me somewhat intrigued. It seemed to surprise her that I was interested in these "older" and "less common" terms.²¹ For context, the identity label 'dominicano ausente' is used interchangeably with 'dominicano que reside en el exterior' (Dominican that resides abroad) by the Dominican government to demarcate emigrants as a distinctive social group within Dominican society. While the term is used by mainstream media, it is not common in everyday use, as Librarian Aponte was trying to explain to me. As a state-led discourse, 'ausente' (absent) was used to describe the geopolitical position of migrants being away, absent, from the Dominican Republic; dividing them (and some may argue, removing them) from Dominican society based on the assumed contributions of their *presence*.²² This pejorative understanding of absence is significant at a time in which Dominican emigrants were not the skilled middle-class who could afford to travel and leave the country during the first wave of immigration to the US. Instead, it was the working-class population with visas that

²¹ As illustrated by Lorgia García-Peña's usage of them.

²² Read: mano de obra (manual labor), economic contribution, political power, and their presence in that past conceptions of dominicanidad.

began to emigrate for economic and sociopolitical needs. Consequently, explained Professor Aponte, ‘dominicanidad ausente’ as a concept had not become a widely popular object of study amongst scholars who studied the Dominican Republic.

Since it seemed rare that at my age and undergraduate level I would find interest in this scholarly debate, she recommended a couple of readings for me from the Dominican Library collection at the DSI. An older text available within the Dominican Library that she suggested I begin with was Dr. Silvio Torres-Saillant’s 1999 publication of “*El retorno de las yolas: ensayos sobre diáspora, democracia y dominicanidad*”²³ (The Return of the Yolas:²⁴ Essays on Diaspora, Democracy and Dominicanidad²⁵). These essays cover a range of discussions centered on the conditions of the Dominican migrant and dominicanidad in “Nueva York.²⁶” From his essay, “El concepto de dominicanidad y la emigración,” comes the epigraph that opens up this chapter exclaiming that dominicanidad is a transborder identity and experience. Ultimately, this essay has been vital in my understanding of the generative nature of dominicanidad ausente (both the concept and type of migrant experience) due to the influence of the migration journey, the navigation of assimilation, and the construction of Dominican heritage.

A few days later a follow up email titled “Dominican migration return sources,” Librarian Aponte attached a recently submitted graduate thesis that she hadn’t yet read in depth but found relevant to my research: Carlos Manuel Abaunza Carranza’s “*Migración dominicana de retorno hacia una tipología del retorno transnacional*” (Dominican Return Migration. Towards A

²³Torres-Saillant, *El retorno de las yolas*.

²⁴ Translation: this term is difficult to translate because it directly relates to a small fishing boat that is known for its use of informally/illegally emigrating out of the Dominican Republic via the Atlantic into the shores of Puerto Rico. These yolas are used to represent Dominican migration, formally and informally, as well as the migrants themselves. And the *return* highlights the challenges and complexities of migration and migrant-hood.

²⁵ I have chosen not to translate ‘dominicanidad’ into ‘dominicanness’ because the power of the Spanish noun gets lost when it becomes an adjective in English.

²⁶ Torres-Saillant, *El retorno de las yolas*.

Transnational Return Typology). Carranza’s research dealt with the motivations and conditions that shaped the travel patterns of Dominicans living in Spain, and those who travel to Spain often. His work attempted to complicate the relationship that Dominican migrants have to the Dominican Republic once they migrate. Carranza’s research was one of the most recent investigations on Dominican identity and mobility that offered me the opportunity to engage with the roles of desire and willpower in shaping mobility and transnational identity.

My conversations with Librarian Aponte left me energized and curious about the prospects of engaging with research from the late 20th and early 21st century. The more my interests expanded, the more I learned that others have done and are doing the work to develop these concepts that reflect our material, meaning and lived realities, as well. The following week I dived into the work of Torres-Saillant and Abaunza Carranza, unaware of the lasting impact it would have on me.

2. Contextualizing Dominican Migration in the 21st Century

Through my reading of Silvio Torres-Saillant’s²⁷ collection of essays, “El retorno de las yolas,” I aimed to explore the usages of the term ‘*dominicanidad ausente*’ as a social fact and concept. I focused on the essay “El concepto de dominicanidad y la emigración” (“The Concept of Dominicanidad and Emigration”).²⁸ In this essay, Torres-Saillant discusses the urgency of

²⁷ Silvio Torres-Saillant is the founding director of the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute at The City College of New York. Dr. Torres-Saillant is well known for his contributions to Dominican Studies on the conditions of dominicanidad, the Dominican Diaspora, Dominican racial ideologies and realities, and more. He is the author of “Caribbean Poetics,” “Introduction to Dominican Blackness,” “An Intellectual History of the Caribbean,” “The Dominican Americans,” and “El tigueraje intelectual.” Dr. Torres-Saillant is currently (as of 2023) an English professor, and a Dean’s Professor of humanities at Syracuse University.

²⁸ This essay was originally published in *Punto y Coma* 4.1 -2 (1993). “Escrito a partir de una ponencia presentada en un encuentro organizado en Nueva York por el Bloque Socialista, Casa Julio de Peña Valdez, junio 23, 1991.” (written in the footnotes of the 1999 republished version)

redefining the state's understanding of *dominicanidad* to one that includes Dominican communities in different geospatial locations. While Torres-Saillant does not use the term 'dominicanidad ausente,' I argue that in his discussion of Dominican migrants in New York City as 'dominicanos ausente,' he is offering us a way of beginning to understand what it means to talk about something like *dominicanidad ausente*.

My understanding of *dominicanidad ausente* begins with framing the construction of the *dominicane ausente*.²⁹ In particular, I will start by defining this group as the Dominican migrant group (including generations of descendants) that emigrated to work and/or live in their place of destiny, temporarily and/or permanently.³⁰ This movement is caused by the economic, laboral, political and social push-out that urban marginalized Dominicans experience.³¹ Torres-Saillant tells us: "Emigra quien no puede quedarse. . . Nuestra emigración es una expatriación" (Those who emigrate do so because they cannot stay. . . Our emigration is a kind of expatriation).³² In this investigation, I take the stance that *dominicanidad ausente* is framed by a forceful/forced expatriation caused by economic, social and/or political pushout. This reframes the extent to which emigration is voluntary, and considers that these pushouts create future migrants who will live abroad permanently. And for those who are not able to emigrate formally or informally, the

²⁹ Here, I intentionally address all Dominicans through the more inclusive non-binary pronouns of *elle/elles*. I will cite that other authors use the "gender-neutral" masculine pronouns of *ellos* to address all Dominicans through, instead.

³⁰ Throughout this research paper, I will present many definitions for the 'dominicano ausente' social group to illustrate and contribute to the expansiveness of the diaspora.

³¹ While there multiple forms of marginalization that Dominicans experience through a variety of conditions, here I am specifically making reference to the socioeconomic position constructed through institutionalized colorism, anti-blackness, and classism that shape the limited labor, housing and healthcare opportunities for Black and Brown Dominicans in overpopulated urban communities. While there are often also White Dominicans in these areas, it is important to frame the racialization of these social and physical spaces as Black. These constructed ghettos are home to Dominicans who are forcefully pushed out of the countryside for medical, economic, educational and/or social reasons, and towards large cities where they are forced to compete in informal and/or formal labor economies to survive the poverty and unemployment that surrounds them. I will extend this positionality to Dominican migrants because their marginalized identity remains consistent before and after migrating.

³²Torres-Saillant, *El retorno de las yolas*, page 18.

get pushed further into the marginalized positions. Thus, the emigration of dominicanes ausentes from the DR is not viewed as temporary—even if they are able to cycle back and forth between DR and abroad—because the conditions of the pushout have made them candidates for forceful migration as a type of expatriation, like Torres-Saillant says. And yet, their attachment and claims to dominicanidad remain and increase. Here we find one of the first contradictions of the term ‘dominicane ausente,’ as the forceful and/or forced *ausencia* (absentness) of Dominican migrants and their descendants.

This sociopolitical position as an exiled emigrant informs the socioeconomic status and potential that Dominicans migrated with. In the section of the essay titled, “Desden, desprecio y paternalismo” Torres-Saillant describes that a “dominicano ausente” who immigrated to New York is viewed as a “simple vendedor de sudor” (simple sweat seller³³) because they were already viewed as a laborer in the Dominican economy. Thus their stereotype represents the motivations that cause their emigration, the marginalized laborer forced out of the economy. This condition and stereotype is present in the name “dominicano ausente.” In being *ausentizado* (*forcefully made to be absent*) from the economic, labor, political and social market, these Dominicans are also being excluded from the dominicanidad they should be entitled to as national and cultural citizens. But instead these Dominican migrants and their descendants are often awarded secondary citizenship by the Dominican society because they are seen as tourists and passers-by.

This construction of the position and identity of dominicanes ausentes allowed Torres-Saillant to continue theorizing on the expansion of the borders of the current narrative of dominicanidad that the Dominican nation-state dominated. He warned Dominicans of the

³³ Read: sell their bodies for labor

division that dominicanidad as a state-led concept³⁴ will cause because it does not consider the varied experiences and developing-identities of the second- and third-generation of dominicanes ausentes³⁵ who would look to identify with their Dominican identity. I want to return to the epigraph I present at the beginning of this chapter. I want to re-assert with Torres-Saillant that dominicanidad exists outside of the Dominican Republic, allowing for Dominicans outside of the Dominican Republic to claim their belonging to dominicanidad. Can dominicanidad travel? Yes, it can. And can it exist within other cultures? Yes, it can. If so, how does it survive and how does it get passed down? This is the question I will focus on.

I claim that dominicanidad is reconstructed by the conditions of ausencia to be more expansive than Dominicanidad. This—Torres-Saillant claimed—required a restructuring of what we have traditionally considered to be the foundation of our cultural identity: “...habrá que reducir la importancia del español como elemento definidor de nuestra nacionalidad y modificar la sumida centralidad del acervo hispánico en nuestra demarcación cultural.”³⁶ Dr. Torres-Saillant sought to decentralize hispanism by reducing the importance of the Spanish language as an identity marker. He called for a reassessment of the foundation of dominicanidad in order for it to be able to survive rising migration and the impacts of globalization in the 21st century. The conditions of dominicanidad ausente are positioned within these concerns of inclusion and expansion for the future generations of descendants.

³⁴ Dominicanidad is the cultural product of the Dominican Republic; dominicanidad describes the culture of self-identified Dominicans, including the diaspora; translates to “dominicanness.”

³⁵ Here I am also expanding dominicana/o/es ausente to include the descendants of Dominican migrants who self-identify as and with their Dominican heritage. This expands dominicanidad outside of the scope of a nation-state and geopolitical borders.

³⁶ Translation: ...we will need to reduce the importance of the Spanish language as a defining element of our nationality and modify the centrality of Hispanism in our cultural demarcation. Torres-Saillant, “El concepto de la dominicanidad y la emigración,” *El retorno de las yolas*, page 147.

I belong to precisely that generation he was referring to back in 1999. I am part of that 21st century generation of Dominicans born in New York City from Dominican migrants – the ones he anticipated would crave to identify with dominicanidad. Through our identification process against the multi-cultural American society we live, we continue to reconstruct and expand the dominicanidad our parents raised us with to include our contemporary realities. I am part of a generation of Dominican-Americans who claim dominicanidad before American belonging. And I am also part of a generation of Dominicans that claim New York City (in particular the Bronx and Uptown) to be their home away from home. I am grateful that Torres-Saillant worked to expand how the Dominican community in New York could conceptualize their practices, culture and identity so that we could grow out into the branches of it, instead of being pushed out by the exclusions. This process is essential to the ways “la dominicanidad sobrevive la separacion del suelo hasta por generaciones.³⁷”

Towards the end of the essay “El concepto de dominicanidad y la emigración” (“The Concept of Dominicanidad and Emigration”), Torres-Saillant said something that has stuck with me for since I read it. It spoke to my own relationship with dominicanidad. Often, my parents would joke around saying that I acted more Dominican than my siblings who were born on the island. I find this to be a common stereotype of Dominican-Americans. Like Torres-Saillant claims in the epigraph used to open this research paper, we find a desire and need to claim dominicanidad to override our American identity in order to belong within our immigrant

³⁷ Translation: “...dominicanness survives geographic separation for generations.” See footnote 16 for the original translation and citation.

communities. It is in our bicultural identification process that we must choose dominicanidad as something to study, invest in, uplift, challenge and contribute to for community care and preservation. And like Torres-Saillant, at times it has made me more Dominican (than my siblings).³⁸

I was born in the Bronx and raised in Washington Heights—in a city with the largest population of Dominicans outside of the Dominican Republic. In a way, *El retorno de las yolas* is the prelude to my life and position as a scholar of Dominican studies. Like Torres-Saillant, dominicanidad is something I live, study, uplift, challenge and contribute to as a dominicana ausente, as the only person in my family born outside of the Dominican Republic. Paradoxically, precisely because of this my Dominican identity is seen as stronger than theirs because it is something that I have had to seek and develop, whereas they have always had it. My knowledge of dominicanidad and my association to it revolves around the conditions of migration, New York City and Blackness. While I am the most American in my family, I am often also the most outwardly Dominican, in order to articulate my belonging to the past, present and future of the diaspora. This position has made me more passionate about the studies of the Dominican diaspora.

Librarian Aponte also suggested I read Carlos Manuel Abaunza Carranza’s 2019 graduate thesis, “Migración dominicana de retorno hacia una tipología del retorno transnacional (Dominican Return Migration. Towards A Transnational Return Typology).³⁹” This study begins

³⁸ Torres-Saillant, “El concepto de la dominicanidad y la emigración,” *El retorno de las yolas*.

³⁹ Abaunza Carranza, “Migración dominicana de retorno hacia una tipología del retorno transnacional,” (Doctoral Dissertation, University Complutense of Madrid, 2019).

by redefining *retorno* in a multifaceted way that covers time, location, migrant identity, motivations for return, and the fluidity of ‘place of origin.’⁴⁰ Carranza discussed mobility through migration and displacement as a way of being in the world, “una forma de ser y estar” (Carranza, 103 in my print out). It is our constructed positionality—as Silvio Torres-Saillant also claimed—that impacts those who migrate and those community members who do not.

As a second-generation immigrant, I know my family and community members live with the desire to return to ‘origin,’ regardless of if they will or not.⁴¹ And in this research, I claim that Dominican sonic practices reflect these desires to return by shaping the sonic environment to be more Dominican. The results of Carranza’s investigation showed that Dominican migrants have two origins, one before migrating and another one after migration. Origin before migration refers to the community they lived in, and origin after migration is usually a new home, in an area with more resources where their quality of life can be higher than in their previous origin. This, Carranza and many other scholars, claim is one of the goals of migration.

*Origen tras el retorno es una categoría que busca diferenciar el origen que el migrante deja atrás al iniciar su proyecto migratoria, el cual se corresponde con el espacio vital de los no migrantes, del origen que el migrante se encuentra tras su regreso al país...intersectan las trayectorias de los emigrantes, los futuros migrantes, los no migrantes y lo migrantes de retorno.*⁴²

(Origin after return is a category that seeks to differentiate between the origin the migrant leaves behind when they begin their migrant project, the one that corresponds to the vital space of the non-migrants, from the origin in which the migrant finds themselves in once they return to their country...the emigrants trajectories intersect, the future migrants, the non-migrants and the returned migrants.)

⁴⁰ Origin being the place (nation) they migrated from; in contrast to ‘destiny’ the place that is migrated to as a (temporary and/or final) destination.

⁴¹ In this case, my parents place of origin is the Dominican Republic. Including the provinces in which they were raised (San Juan and San Cristobal), and the one in which they started a family (San Cristobal).

⁴² Abaunza Carranza, “Migración dominicana de retorno hacia una tipología del retorno transnacional,” page 253.

The change in origin is dictated by the conditions and effects of return migration.

Carranza's research complicates the realities and categories of 'retorno' (return) and 'no retorno' (no return) as being directly related to transnational experiences of spatio-temporality that

Figura 4. Representación gráfica de la tipología del retorno transnacional



Fuente: elaboración propia con base en la tipología realizada durante esta investigación

change relations to origin. From his data he poses personal desire (*deseo*) and willpower (*voluntad*) as two variables that dictate the movements of Dominican migrants. This figure to the left is a graphic illustration of his proposed typology of transnational return migration amongst Dominican migrants from Spain⁴³: *retorno voluntario* (voluntary return), *no retorno* (no return), *retorno forzado*

(forced return), and *retorno forzoso* (forceful return). I argue that this typology allows us to consider 'no retorno' as a category of return migration because it illustrates the *ausencia* present in *dominicanidad ausente*.⁴⁴

As a daughter of Dominican immigrants and a scholar of Dominican Studies, I was greatly impacted and inspired by this typology. It motivated me to further complicate it by investigating *no retorno* (no return back to origin) as a type of movement. Washington Heights⁴⁵ illustrates the manifestation of the complex relationship between desire, willpower and mobility. Through transnational networks *dominicanes ausentes* (1) recreate Dominican culture and

⁴³ His research was centered around the circulation of Dominican migrants/travelers between DR and Spain.

⁴⁴ Abaunza Carranza, "Migración dominicana de retorno hacia una tipología del retorno transnacional." Figure 4, "Graphic representation of the typology of transnational return," page 216.

⁴⁵ I will further dive into Washington Heights in Chapter 2.

practices in a new place, and (2) center the needs and desires of Dominican migrants as impacted by *ausencia*.

Through my ethnographic work, I have drawn a tie between *dominicanidad ausente* as the temporary way that Dominicans born and raised abroad experience the Dominican Republic as both a physical space and a cultural memory, and sonic practices and Dembow music. My recent studies within Latin American migration were motivating me to contextualize how descendants of Dominican migrants experience return migration, and how they express their mobility. Through this framework of the variety of motivations and experiences within return and no return migration, I will explore the expression of mobility of Dominican migrants as a construction of the conditions of their *ausencia* and their articulations through it.

Here we can put Silvio Torres-Saillant in conversation with Carlos Manuel Abaunza Carranza. Torres-Saillant's expansion of *dominicanidad* to include the realities of migrants is reliant on the construction of the migrant body and experience as forced/forceful, similar to the language that frame Carranza's study. Carranza explains to us the nuances of forced and forceful return migration being shaped by desire and willpower when contextualized with the relationship the migrant has to citizenship (to both place of origin and destiny) and mobility. Together, their work lays out the conditions that I will consider as the historical conditions of *dominicanidad ausente*. In 21st century Washington Heights, this is the context that shapes Dominican migrants in New York, *Dominican Yorkers*; these are the lines of analysis that shape this investigation.

3. My (Ongoing) Journey with Lorgia García-Peña

“the word ausente serves as a metaphor for the complex position Dominican migrants occupy within both national territories that define them. They are absent—that is, excluded—from accessing full citizenship and representation in the United States as well as in the Dominican Republic. Finally, the term dominicanos ausentes is fruitful in a study of the ever-growing Dominican diaspora that is rapidly extending outside the Caribbean and the United States”⁴⁶

Lorgia Garcia-Pena

*The Borders of Dominicanidad:
Race, Nation and Archives of Contradiction*

Doctor Lorgia García-Peña’s work has introduced me to a whole set of possibilities in Dominican cultural (re)membering that I had not yet been exposed to. It was in her work that I first encountered the concept of dominicanidad ausente and began wondering how the scholars that came before me had made sense of the identity development of Dominican-Americans.⁴⁷ The CUNY Dominican Studies Institute felt like the most appropriate place to dive into the conceptualization of ‘dominicanidad ausente’ as Lorgia presented it in *Borders of Dominicanidad*. It was in this same library and archives that she conducted part of her research for this text. She spoke to the same scholars and professionals that I had the opportunity to interact with. This is the best place to discuss the politics of belonging and migration of Dominicanworkers.

⁴⁶ García Peña, “Writing from El Nié: Exile and the Poetics of Dominicanidad *Ausente*,” *The Borders of Dominicanidad*, page 172.

⁴⁷ Lorgia defines dominicanidad ausente with the following analysis: “Dominicanidad ausente destabilizes the official discourse of the Dominican nation, and the canon of cultural and literary production in both territories, leading to a more democratic dialogue based on rayano consciousness. This new rayano consciousness is also contributing to intrasolidarity dialogues that confront the trauma of violence and division that has marked the relationship between Haitians and Dominicans. Thus, in El Nié and through the marginal language of Dominicanish, the kind of solidarity Bosch imagined is finally becoming.” García Peña, “Writing from El Nié: Exile and the Poetics of Dominicanidad *Ausente*,” *The Borders of Dominicanidad*, page 202.

From “The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation and Archives of Contradictions,” Dr. Lorgia Garcia Pena offers us the power of Rayano Consciousness in challenging hegemonic practices and ideologies within dominicanidad. In particular, García Peña offers rayano consciousness for the ways in which it “remaps Hispaniola’s borders on the historicized body of the Dominican racialized subject, bringing attention to the persistent violence of colonial presence, but also to multiple ways of contestations. Rayano consciousness offers the possibility of imagining the rayano body as a site for the performance of political contradiction.”⁴⁸

Throughout the text, Lorgia García-Peña continues to redefine dominicanidad against the archive. In this section, I will present my interpretation of Lorgia García-Peña’s usage. The purpose of this text is to dive into the way the Dominican Republic’s hegemonic state-agenda becomes visible when we contradict popular national narratives. This contradiction is made when the material realities and memories of the most marginalized Dominicans—poor, black and/or migrants—is analyzed as generative to dominicanidad, instead of as undesirable.⁴⁹

*I see dominicanidad as a category that emerges out of the historical events that placed the Dominican Republic in a geographic and symbolic border between the United States and Haiti since its birth in 1844. Dominicanidad is thus inclusive of subjects as well as the dictions that produce them. It also encompasses multiple territories and ethnoracial identifications: Dominicanyork, rayano, dominicano, Afro- Dominican. Those, in turn, make up Dominican subjectivities across national spaces.*⁵⁰

Like Lorgia, I am moving into a new branch of dominicanidad ausente that is situated within the historical conditions, characteristics and practices of Dominican migrants and their descendants. In this text, García-Peña is mainly focused on *the poetics* of dominicanidad ausente by analyzing the literary productions that have archived the norms and standards of

⁴⁸ García Peña, “Writing from El Nié: Exile and the Poetics of Dominicanidad Ausente.”

⁴⁹ This migrant position includes both Haitian migrants and Dominican emigrants. And it includes their descendants who are also viewed as foreigners to the Dominican state.

⁵⁰ García Peña, “Introduction: Dominicanidad in Contradiction,” *The Borders of Dominicanidad*, page 03.

Dominicanidad. The “poetics of dominicanidad ausente” is largely rooted in the writings of Juan Bosch and Pedro Vergés who wrote while in exile and about their exile. I want to diverge from “the poetics” and literary production of dominicanidad ausente as a genre, and move into the conditions within which migrants produce and articulate dominicanidad ausente as the reconstruction of Dominican culture through the lens of the diaspora.⁵¹

Historically rooted in the 150 years of unequal relationship between the United States and the Dominican Republic, and particularly in the trauma of the US intervention of 1965, I argue that this poetics of dominicanidad ausente breaks away from the nostalgic trope of migration narratives in order to propose a critique of the relationship between power, the production of history, and the construction of transnational citizenship and identities...Poetics of dominicanidad ausente has emerged as a dialectic process of transnational interpellation of the official national narration of dominicanidad solidified during the Trujillo regime.⁵²

From her analysis of the poetics of dominicanidad ausente, I will claim that dominicanidad ausente as the cultural production of dominicanes ausentes is rooted in the same history and also emerges as “a dialectic process of transnational interpellation.” For dominicanes ausentes, their reconstruction of the dominicanidad they carry is formed by those practices and characteristics they choose to abandon and those they choose to continue with. Daily, they are engaging in an interpellation and reconstruction of the history and identity that Dominicanidad has taught them. It is significant that the ausencia (absence) being experienced allows for a

⁵¹ A note on identity: I am not trying to claim that migrant Dominicans and their descendants should now start to identify with this term colloquially. I find it useful academically because the term itself is an archive of contradictions and illustrates the power of diction. Thus, academically I argue it can be useful to analyze that diction and (re)member it. I want to illustrate the way these contradictions map themselves onto the dominicane ausente, and how they can help us further understand the sociopolitical position of Dominicans.

⁵² García Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad*, “Writing from El Nié: Exile and the Poetics of Dominicanidad Ausente,” page 174.

critique—as Lorgia mentions—of the colonial ties of their narratives of patria (motherland) and nation.

During this paper I will be exploring the urban sound practices that reproduce *dominicanidad ausente*⁵³ because I am concerned with the development of Dominican cultural identity as separate from the nation-state’s desires. Especially when the greatest contributors to contemporary dominicanidad are oppressed, marginalized and deemed undesirable to the nation-state’s ideal construction of Dominican society and its false racial democracy.

4. The Contradictions within Ausencia

This chapter begins with a quote that states that “dominicanness survives geographic separation for generations.⁵⁴” This means that dominicanidad *can* and *does* exist outside of the Dominican Republic. From here we can contextualize the need for the distinction García Peña made between dominicanidad and Dominicanidad. Here begins the *contradiction*—as Lorgia García Peña would say—of dominicanidad ausente.⁵⁵

As a concept, ausencia (absentness) is essential to how dominicanidad is conceptualized outside of the DR. It is both a demarcation of geographical location, and sociopolitical location. And, it holds within it a powerful contradiction that is highlighted—instead of overshadowed—by

⁵³ It is important to note that “dominicanidad ausente” as a noun is a social fact, a concept and a type of experience. It is the phenomenon of Dominican culture existing and reproducing itself outside of Dominican Republic; it is a socially construction of how migrant Dominicans and their descendants may and will experience their Dominican identity outside of the DR, and how they may exist as individuals within new places outside of the DR; and it is a type of dominicanidad that some Dominicans may and will experience if they travel outside of the DR.

⁵⁴Torres, Saillant, “El concepto de la dominicanidad y la emigración,” page 134.

⁵⁵ This term exists on a variety of grammatical and social levels. One, it names the social fact that Dominicans express and create Dominicaness outside of the border of the DR. Two, it describes a type of experience with dominicanidad that Dominicans have when they migrate and/or participate in the culture of migration. Three, which is the main focus of this paper, is a concept that identifies a social construction of Dominican identity that can be theorized.

the presence of the term. I argue that this irony is the room for reclamation of this academic concept that can continue to help us understand the experiences and conditions of Dominican migrants.

The term ‘dominicanidad ausente’ can be understood as two coexisting realities:

The first part from what I understand is the irony of the Dominican government⁵⁶ and citizens classifying other Dominicans based on their presence/absence as if it is a political position; while the emotions tied to absence (longing, yearning, missing out, etc.) truly frame a migrant's everyday experience. Therefore, there is both truth and irony to the use of *ausente*; I would like to conceptualize *ausencia* within this truth and irony.

I want to present *ausencia* as (1) the state of being perceived and/or feeling as though you are as absent from (a) the physical environment (b) the culture (c) the political and economic market economy and (d) the legal rights and citizenship. And I want to pose it as construction of *ausentar(se)*, meaning to make someone be absent and/or part ways with something, and *ausentarse*, meaning to make yourself absent and/or to stay away. I want to grow from these terms because they connect to Carranza’s contributions of forced and forceful migration, regardless of willpower (*voluntad*).

The state of being called absent is significant because it contains many material and linguistic contradictions.⁵⁷ I will explore sonic practices in the soundscape of New York City to

⁵⁶ The irony that the Dominican government would have at one point used this term when referring to migrants tells us that the government has removed themselves from the forced absence of these Dominicans.

⁵⁷ While (a)-(d) are the perceived participation gaps of dominicanos ausentes, Dominicans participate in Dominican economy (a) monetarily in remittances (b) culturally engaging in conversations via social media platforms, long distance calls, temporary visits, and consuming dominican media abroad (c) keeping up with dominican politics abroad via media, protesting and participating in socio political movements/demonstrations outside of the Dominican Republic, voting for elected officials while abroad, and impacting dominican politics as they take into

explore the contradictions that create room for lived realities and new possibilities beyond Dominicanidad. This framework will allow the product of this research to be for the Dominican people and their own self-articulation. I will now return to the definition I presented in the introduction:

dominicanidad ausente: A historical condition of diasporic identity/identification defined by both a type of experience in relation to dominicanidad and the conceptual condition of being ausente (absent) through migration. It is the position of both (1) experiencing one's Dominican identity always in relation with the yearning to return, while (2) asserting one's belonging to a diasporic community abroad. The conditions of the nostalgic pull to the past (of dominicanidad), and an articulation of belonging to the present and future (of dominicanidad). I claim that dominicanidad ausente is a conditional relationship to the Dominican Republic in which the diaspora reconstructs and redefines who they are and want to be, in conversation with their heritage and futures. Asserting one's presence as a refusal to the past, and instead as belonging to diasporic communities in the present and future. I am not describing nostalgia, instead a dialectical relationship. Dominicanidad ausente is simultaneously the absence of Dominicanidad—allowing for one to define oneself *beyond* Dominicanidad—while also being defined by the longing for dominicanidad. This is not an identity, it is a condition of migration defined by the dialectical relationship between two forces.

I am presenting urban dominicanidad ausente as the conceptualization of the conditions within which Dominican Yorkers are situated in relation to place (the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and the United States), desire and willpower, and belonging (to dominicanidad and the

concern the role of the Dominican migrant in Dominican affairs and (d) getting dual citizenship abroad and/or laying claim to your identities outside of the confines of the dominican nation-state.

Dominican Diaspora). While I am inspired by Lorgia García-Peña, I am moving towards a specifically urban analysis to understand Dominican workers. I will use this foundation of migration studies to analyze the role of sound and music in the construction of Dominican transnational identity. I will explore the contradictions to create room for lived realities and new possibilities outside of the nation-state's narrative that's rooted in hegemonic power. This framework will allow the product of this research to be for the Dominican people and their own self-articulation.

Chapter 2:

The Sound Praxis of Dominican Yorkers

*When Blackness and Black expression
is so policed we must allow ourselves
to be Black, sonically or otherwise.*

Jhanique Lovejoy

Once mandatory quarantine began in March 2020, Washington Heights grew warily quiet. There would be times of irie calmness that would be interrupted by back to back ambulance and police sirens, alerting us that we were living through a deadly pandemic. Yet, in the midst of this shift in our soundscape, there were times of communion that allowed us to connect with our neighbors to motivate one another. Daily at 7pm, many of us would open our windows and begin to bang on pots and pans, shouting out of our windows to acknowledge and celebrate the essential workers that kept our city running: the healthcare workers saving our lives, the delivery drivers who kept us fed, the EMT workers who kept us safe, the Sanitation workers that kept our environments clean, the teachers who helped students make sense of the world, the retail workers who kept our supermarkets and pharmacies open and, of course, the individuals and families that were suffering from the loss and separation of their loved ones in isolation. This moment of phatic communion served as a mutual assurance that despite

everything, we were still present; that communities wanted to take care of each other, and that we were all going through this experience as a community.⁵⁸

Amongst the quiet, unexpected fireworks would sometimes take over the urban soundscape from early in the evening into the first morning hours. Both unexpected and *very* New York.⁵⁹ A reminder of summer time Washington Height antics, of celebration, and reclamation of existence. While to many the sounds created by these fireworks were disruptive and the source of noise complaints, for others they worked against the chaos of sirens. As if yelling out, we are still here, “WE OUTSIDE!”

The one thing that did not change drastically in the neighborhood during the quarantine were the sounds of bus engines rising and falling as they came and went from bus stops. Even though they came with less frequency due to the changed New York City area Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) schedule, they still managed to remind us of the city we knew before quarantine. Counterintuitively, perhaps, to me they continued to serve as bedtime lullaby; bringing solace, comfort, and warmth in a challenging time.

This chapter is about sonic ways of knowing. I will introduce the sonic environments that Dominican Yorkers are surrounded by, and also create and analyze them as spaces in which sounds are produced, reproduced and controlled as a mode of community building. Essential to

⁵⁸ Here, I am referencing the Bronislaw Malinowski understanding of phatic communion as “bonding by language” for the purpose of establishing connections, without necessarily communicating information.

⁵⁹ The persistent present of fireworks in the midst of a deadly pandemic felt shocking at first, but quickly became very normal and very fitting. In the land of *YEERRs* and *YOUKNOWTHEFUCKINGVIBES*, it is not strange for New Yorkers to use their voice to exclaim their joy, their presence, their survival, and their love. “We Outside” was probably the most popular caption of the summer because it captured the desire and the need that people had *to be outside in communion with one another and the environment*. More than a return to normalcy, people desired safe and loving social interactions, and movement. This, I claim, is partially the motivation for the fireworks and the significant impact it had on my life.

this analysis is the study of sound as a maker of urban socio-political dynamics and how the relationship that Dominican Yorkers have to sound and place is one that is constructed through sound practices or sound praxis. I argue that their navigation of the city in this way produces sound as a kind of knowledge that allows them to articulate their presence and belonging –both to Washington Heights and the Bronx – and their dominicanidad through communicative channels developed through phatic labor.⁶⁰ I show how it is through sonic practices that Dominican Yorkers continue to build a strong, transnational sense of dominicanidad in Washington Heights

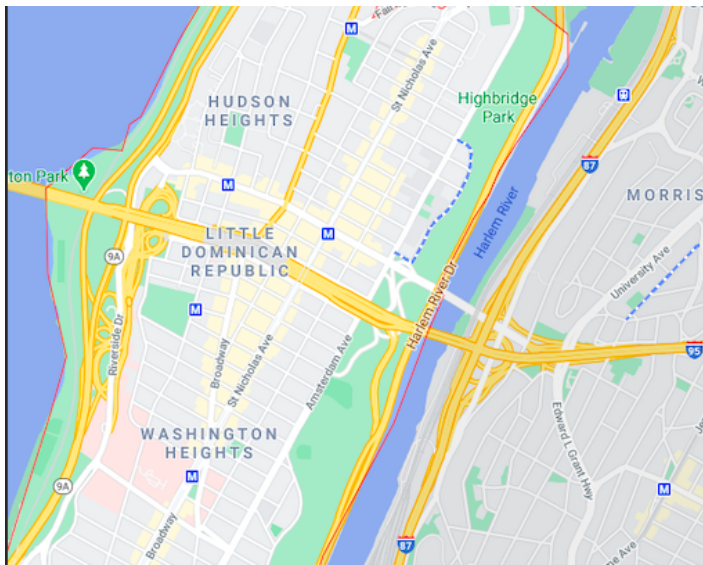
1. Introducing the Study of Urban Soundscapes

1.1. *Understanding the Sound Praxis of Washington Heights*

We are accustomed to viewing, navigating, and understanding the city as a spatial terrain. In other words, we know the city primarily *as a geographic* place. In what follows I would like to deviate from this norm and dive into the sonic realm that exists right above, within, and under the physical space that constitutes the neighborhood of Washington Heights in Uptown Manhattan, NY. Let me begin with the notion of soundscape. A *soundscape* is the accumulated sounds heard in a particular location, as a whole they might be considered elements in a sonic environment. It is in this realm that anthrophony, geophony, and biophony coexist as producers

⁶⁰ I will further introduce this term in Chapter 2 Section 3.1: “The Role of the Phatic in Transnationalism.”

and reproducers of the environment.⁶¹ It is this multiplicity, I claim, that makes soundscapes sites of social identity and difference.



I will emphasize again that the soundscape is a site of difference. Through these differences we learn to identify ourselves and our behaviors against (and within) the context that we are situated in. In Washington Heights most affordable housing is located near roads, bridges, highways, subway lines, and bus routes that constantly shape the neighborhoods'

soundscape with a constant motor hum .. As working class families, we are positioned in crowded spaces because that is where affordable housing is consolidated. Our environments are constructed by economic forces that value our productivity over our health and humanity. And yet in the face of this adversity we learn to navigate the overlapping public and private spheres within our soundscapes. The apartment building I grew up in and my family continues to live in has always had thin walls that allow for these sounds to penetrate and travel from one space to another. This meant that my personal soundscape included the patter of the child running upstairs, the music my neighbor was blasting to the side, the phone conversations pouring in through the window from a neighbor downstairs, and the sounds of traffic and commuter movement – they all existed and shaped my private space.

⁶¹Guzy, "The Sound of Life: What Is a Soundscape?"

While the majority of Dominicans residing in the city live in the Bronx, Uptown Manhattan (from Harlem to Inwood), which includes Washington Heights, is the imagined center for political, social and economic activity of dominicanes ausentes. Indeed, Dominican migrants have built a transnational community in Washington Heights Reflected in the recent proposal to make Washington Heights a historic neighborhood, renaming it “Little Dominican Republic.”⁶² Dyckman Avenue⁶³ in Inwood is home to a large number of restaurants, lounges, and clubs that are well known for their particularly Dominican version of Latin ambiance. In these spaces Bachata and Merengue have long been a part of the soundscape of Dominicanidad, yet more recently Dembow is quickly becoming prevalent in these environments, especially in and around The Heights. Almost overnight, it has become the defining sound of Dyckman Avenue.⁶⁴

Most Saturday mornings at home begin with my mother blasting Bachata and Merengue music, signaling that it will be a day full of cleaning and tending to our home. In the afternoon, I get to play my own music and in my transition between the living room and kitchen I also hear the different types of music coming from outside of our apartment building. Later, when the car honking begins right outside of my window due to the end-of-the-workday traffic on the George Washington Bridge and the Cross Bronx Expressway, I know the afternoon is over. At night, the rise and fall of the bus engines as they come and go lull me and the rest of the neighborhood to sleep. This, of course, unless you’re on Saint. Nicholas, in which case the sounds of guitars, güiras and drums slip out the doors of packed restaurants and lounges. Weekends in Washington

⁶² CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, “An Interactive Map Showcasing the Geographic of a Proposed Dominican Historic District in Washington Heights,” Dominican Historic Neighborhoods, CUNY Dominican Studies Institute at the City College of New York, Accessed February 5, 2023, <http://www.dominicanhistoricneighborhoods.com/>.

⁶³ While Dyckman Avenue is part of Inwood and is the literal avenue that distinguishes the Heights from Inwood, I will often conflate Dyckman as being part of the Heights because it is a Dominican space that is often understood as being a part of the Heights. This is not to say it isn’t part of Inwood, but to discuss the socio-cultural sphere of Dyckman as being Washington-Heights-adjacent.

⁶⁴ I will further explore this in Chapter 3.

Heights are full of sound. This is the city I grew up in and continue to know as the soundscape of home.

Drawing from my ethnographic research in Washington Heights, I claim that the urban sonic realm is a constructed space that urban dwellers continuously reproduce through sound performance. The multiple sounds circulating exist in a variety of relationships, some symbiotic and other tense, but they always inform the existence of the other. For example, the act of playing music from speakers outside in public space is a common sonic performance that transforms Washington Heights into a Dominican space by replicating behaviors practiced in Dominican households that spill into public spaces. For some this will be a source of joy and familiarity, and for others it will be a disruptive presence, depending on their associations to *dominicanidad*. The sonic performance of playing music out loud in the street is also a result of how people navigate hegemonic systems that construct their material realities through paradigms of control and order. For example, long-time residents sit outside of their buildings in foldable chairs and play music in public to invite others to enjoy and invite others to join.

From this understanding, I define *urban sound praxis* as the intersectional exercise or practice of the urban soundscape, inseparable from the sociopolitical context that surrounds and constructs the soundscapes. Grupo Musicultura (The Musicultura Group) offers a more concise definition of sound praxis: “the articulation between discourses, actions, and practices surrounding sound.”⁶⁵ The soundscapes of New York city exist within—not in the background to—these conditions that make the behaviors of marginalized communities and individuals hypervisible under an oppressive agenda of social control.

⁶⁵ Grupo Musicultura, 2010, p. 219.

We are constantly told that the city is “loud, noisy, and rowdy, just like the people who lived in it.”⁶⁶ And this stereotype was almost always applied to Black and Brown low-income spaces. Our neighborhoods, our schools, our parks, our apartment buildings, our streets and our own bodies were and continue to be branded as noisy. In talking about the opinions of outsiders in Uptown Manhattan, Caroline stated, “they just say we're loud, that we're making the space noisy and crowded and that they didn't pay [rent] for this.”⁶⁷ Outside forces continue to project that our undesired “noisy” presence and bodies make a space undesirable. These stereotypes are devoid of the sound praxis that construct our behaviors. Rarely did those promoting this stereotype and labeling us as producers of noise consider the sounds we were surrounded by. “There's so much going on that we have to be loud...it makes sense,” claimed Caroline. Between the cars honking on the nearby highway and streets, the construction always happening, the advertisements fighting for your attention, and the private conversations, you have to confront and understand all these sound producers when you are navigating Washington Heights.

1.2. *Learning the City through Sound*

In Washington Heights, people frequently employ *sonic knowledge* to navigate the city. Here I use this concept to refer to the production, circulation, accumulation, and interpretation of information and meaning that develops an understanding of society through in-taken sounds. Here an example from fieldwork might help illuminate this point. My interview with Helena began a little differently than previous ones. I decided to start by asking her questions about her

⁶⁶ This is the message that the media conveys to take control over the narrative that urban dwellers have over their behaviors and environments.

⁶⁷ Caroline, Interview.

childhood understanding of Dominican spaces and music and then asking her to compare it to her current relationship with the Bronx and Uptown. This led to a very fruitful conversation about Helena’s understanding of the process of acquiring information about the city through sound:

Patricia: *Do you think being from New York City impacts how you perceive music?*

Helena: *Absolutely, I think, absolutely—I think there's a certain pride that New Yorkers have when it comes to certain genres and claiming them...I feel like you just have such a connection to [the specific music] because you see that. And you hear that when you're outside, like there's like a feeling to like the neighborhood I grew up in. And there's a genuine sound to it—where like you go into a store, and there's a certain type of music genre playing, and you're outside and somebody is bumping a certain type of music genre out there car, loud as fuck, like. And there's just genuinely a sound and an association that I feel like New Yorkers have with music, like from where they're from.*

At a young age Helena learned to make note of the different sounds she heard as she moved from one space into another in and around New York. She has used this sound knowledge to learn the distinguishing characteristics of neighborhoods through their sonic expressions. In her answer to my question, she relates it to her own neighborhood—her own space—claiming a sound association with where she is from, in this case Harlem. I call this association a *sound identity* that she attributes to her community.⁶⁸

Sonic knowledge is important because it informs our assumptions and behaviors. When Helena stated that her neighborhood has “a genuine sound,” she implied that she also expects it to sound a certain way and thus, in the absence of that sound, she would have a direct response because she would be able to notice a difference in the soundscape of the environment. The

⁶⁸ I define sound identity as both (1) the association(s) to sounds; and (2) a sonic association used to categorize/identify a person, place, event, etc.

presence of sound communicates the state of an environment and the activity within it, especially when we have an expectation for it. Helena's discussion of sound identity expresses sonic knowledge as if it were necessary street knowledge. It is information about a specific place that tells you who is and isn't present, your cultural proximity to the community, and functions of the space. This information is essential in determining the way to conduct yourself in new and familiar places.

Sound identity also allows you to tell when dominicanidad in New York is being misrepresented. In conversation with Catalina, fellow uptown resident, we had to talk about the musical drama film "In the Heights." The film is based on the stage musical by Quiara Alegria Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda, directed by Jon M. Chu. While the film takes place in Washington Heights, it is not necessarily about the specific lived experiences in this predominantly Dominican community, but rather an exploration of latinidad in New York City. There is an iconic scene in the film in which Leslie Grace's character Nina says, "Shhh... Let me just listen to my block." The scene is followed by silence.⁶⁹ And while the scene makes sense in the context of the musical drama film, it doesn't not represent Washington Heights. s someone who often frequents the area⁷⁰ in which it takes place, it *especially* doesn't represent where the scene was shot. I was at J. Hood days after the film had started to stream on HBO Max and there were some dudes smoking in the corner saying, "Let me listen to my block" as they played New York Rap music out of a small portable speaker. Another one responded laughing saying, "Yo,

⁶⁹ I would like to specify that the sound that follows is categorized as "silence" in direct contrast to the more common loud and musical sounds of Washington Heights. So yes there are car sounds in the distance, but music and voices are absent in the space.

⁷⁰ This scene was shot in J. Hood Wright Park on Fort Washington Avenue between 173rd and 176th in Washington Heights. During the summertime (which the film is set in), this park is filled with the laughter and shouts of kids, the sounds of dominoes and chess pieces hitting concrete tables, Dominican music loudly exiting speakers, soccer balls hitting the fences, and dogs barking in their designated play area. This is a sonically active space. That is why many people felt like this scene did not make sense.

that shit was mad corny.” He obviously got the reference, and understood the sarcasm in his friend's usage of the line. Caroline and I shared a very similar exchange during our interview:

Caroline: *...I grew up my whole life walking in the neighborhoods and hearing it. Like people with speakers are always playing like Spanish music. But like if you walk on 181st, there's no silent walk in 181st, there is no such thing as minding your business and walking slowly, and walking silently in 181st. I was there the other day—changing my phone in AT&T. Shoutout to Wadsworth 'cause I was there and cause every time I pass it I'm like, “muah, Patricia” [chuckles] but I was there like at AT&T changing my phone, and my brother was just like, ugh, I hate coming up here, and I was like, “Yo, like, let me listen to my block” [we start laughing]*

Patricia: *Yeooo! Lin Manuel Miranda debe de tener verguenza because how you say let me listen to my block and its silent—*

Caroline: *—and it's silent! like what! if you don't—if you don't play at least one YEERRR like, Are you really from New York?*

As this exchange between Caroline and I shows, there was a large disconnect between this scene in the film and the sonic knowledge of people who live in and frequent The Heights. Caroline's ironic reference to the line in the film indexes her own reading of that moment as a misrepresentation of the sound identity of The Heights and by extension of Dominican New York. Her brother complained about being on 181 street because it is full of commuters, street vendors, advertisements, music, conversation and traffic. There is a lot to manage sound-wise in this commercial street in the Heights, making it overwhelming and at times unappealing – to some, like her brother, it might feel like too much noise. It is precisely in response to his desire for quiet and calm on 181 street, Catalina ironically says, “Let me listen to my block,” to honor the soundscape of the Heights, instead of wishing to be somewhere else.

This was a really fun moment. We got to laugh and engage in this conversation about misrepresentation in a funny way. We made fun of Lin-Manuel Miranda⁷¹ for not at least including the most basic “yeerrr”⁷² as a geospatial language. Even when people imitate New Yorkers on social media, “yeerr” and “deadass” are essential in their NYC vocabulary. The lack of presence of these sonic expressions and sonic practices (in this one scene) that are closely associated with Washington Heights illustrate the significant impact that sound has on how we interpret information.

2. The Sound Praxis of Dominican Yorkers and Black Sound

2.1. *The Paradigm of Territorial Control on Urban Sonic Environments*

For the sake of specificity I will need to ground my understanding of the development of Dominican Yorkers in the urban environment in which their *dominicanidad* is being performed and reproduced. I use *urban dominicanidad ausente* to centralize the impacts the constructed urban spheres have on Dominican migrant-hood and identity development. In particular because New York City is such a unique place in its diversity of language, culture and social structures. I argue that *dominicanes ausentes* from urban settings travel with urban knowledge that they use to understand New York City. Washington Heights is largely formed by this urban knowledge. In particular the customary behaviors become a blend of *dominicanidad* and American assimilation.

⁷¹ In this case, Lin-Manuel Miranda is the face of the film, especially since he is from Washington Heights.

⁷² (Spelling may vary) New York City slang; expresses a greeting.

Dominican migrants and their descendants carry a different collective knowledge of how to relate to environments and communities.⁷³ Not only through Dominican urban knowledge, but also through what Katherine McKittrick names’ “a Black sense of place.⁷⁴” I want to emphasize the relationship between racialized migrants, the way a place is constructed through race-based place-making, and the experience of racialized people moving through and into racialized places. For this I employ McKittrick’s exploration of black spatiality.

wherein the structural workings of racism kept black cultures in place and tagged them as placeless...this is a sense of place wherein the violence of displacement and bondage, produced within a plantation economy, extends and is given a geographic future...With this in mind, a black sense of place might not to be read as an authentication of blackness, or a truth-telling conceptual device, or an offering of a ‘better’ place; rather a black sense of place locates the ways in which anti-black violences in the Americas evidence protean plantation futures as spaces of encounter that hold in them useful anti-colonial practices and narratives.

There are three great contributions that this concept offers to my explanation of Dominican places in New York City and in the Dominican Republic. Black people in the Americas are positioned as “in place” and “placeless” by the plantation economy that determined their relationship to movement and place in the Americas. This position as being “in place” and “placeless” allows for anti-blackness to pose Blackness as foreign—excluding it from the national

⁷³ For instance, there are Dominicans who work as food delivery drivers who use mopeds to transport food, driving on roads and sidewalks. The use of a moped reflects that large motorcycle driving culture that the Dominican economy depends on. Dominicans are accustomed to circulating everything from food, people, mail, construction materials and more on motorcycles. The summer of 2019, the brand Revel introduced rentable electronic mopeds onto the streets of New York City. These vespa-like vehicles that you can reserve through an app became a hot commodity in Uptown Manhattan. In particular because they reflected the Dominican motorcycle culture that does not exist within New York City. Naturally, many Dominicans began to use the Revels# for a variety of transportation needs, one of them being delivery service. After Revel temporarily suspended its services, the moped usage for delivery drivers grew in Washington Heights as Dominicans continued to apply their urban transportation behaviors to New York City. These Dominican delivery drivers on mopeds reflect the human infrastructure that is vital to the Dominican economy, recreating it in transnational Dominican spaces.

⁷⁴ Katherine McKittrick (2011) On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12:8, 947-963, DOI: [10.1080/14649365.2011.624280](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2011.624280)

imaginary⁷⁵—to the Dominican identity, allowing for anti-haitianism to be used to inform dictions of Dominican blackness. Here, McKittrick highlights that the “geographic futures” of Black people were first constructed by the plantation economy, and continue to be influenced by the race-based place-making that descends from the plantation economy. Meaning that racialized people are mapped onto spaces by the systems that racialize their movement, creating places where they belong and others where they are undesired. And most importantly, a black sense of place—as awareness and embodiment of this historical relationship—offer us a space “encounter” where histories can be navigated for liberation. Uptown Manhattan and the Bronx are spaces that Dominicans navigate with a black sense of place, often referred to as double consciousness. Dominican Yorkers’ racialization allows them to understand how they are *placed* in these spaces—a black sense of place—while understanding their ability to construct a transnational community in a place where they are “placeless.” Soundscapes can also be understood as a space of encounter, as well.

The sound practices of urban dwellers are positioned within a hegemonic system of social order and control. Earlier I established that sound is a site of difference across spaces. Using Gilsing et al’s article on the impact of Peacekeeping Police Units (UPPs) on the sound practices of residents in the favelas of the city of Rio de Janeiro, we can understand that states and systems of surveillance act on a paradigm of territorial control that establishes urban reorganization to reflect a “right” moral code of public practices and behaviors. I claim that the New York City government and systems of surveillance (NYPD) also exert their ideal paradigm of territorial control that values property over people. Thus, the sonic realm where differences are made

⁷⁵ Here I use ‘imaginary’ in reference to the desired and constructed compositions of the national population, the culture, and the national image that is projected to other nations.

hypervisible can suffer from prejudice and criminalization, especially if these spaces are populated by black, poor and/or migrant populations. The soundscapes of New York city exist within, not in the background to, this urban sound praxis that makes the behaviors of marginalized communities hypervisible under an oppressive agenda of social control.

Human infrastructure does not peacefully exist in these Dominican spaces in New York City. In multiple responses, Catalina discussed the changes her environment has gone through during her lifetime. She cites the importance of the human infrastructure by constantly describing who is in these places and the sounds they produce. But then, she drops the rose colored glasses and describes the rising unaffordability of her environment. And then, we begin to discuss Dyckman nightlife as the economic infrastructure that upholds the traditional businesses that define Dyckman as a Dominican space of social interaction.

Caroline: *I love being from upper Manhattan. I love the sense of community that it has. But it's also hard to ignore the fact that like, if it—if it isn't for the nightclubs that are currently in Dyckman, 90% of its businesses would be down the gutter; because there's just nothing really there for the people that reside there anymore.*⁷⁶

As previously mentioned, these nightclubs are known for their Latin flavors, in particular the Dominican ambiance they recreate through food, music and dancing culture. The reproduction of Dominican sounds allow for dominicanidad to map itself onto the soundscape and physical environment. However, this space is being gentrified and the other Dominican businesses and residents are less and less able to afford rent. So while this place sounds Dominican and is largely associated with this community, it is less and less sustainable for

⁷⁶ Caroline interview.

Dominicans to maintain their cultural economy amidst this change. And this is part of the sound praxis creating the soundscape of this community.



On Twitter, Morgan Jerkins (@MorganJerkins) created a thread about the sounds of gentrification. The original tweet said: “Someone recently wrote that a sign of gentrification is the lack of sound and I’m about to fall down another rabbit hole of the colonialist history of noise and volume control

for Black people.⁷⁷” With 4,887 retweets and 38.4K likes, this tweet resonated with thousands of people on Twitter. It also resonated with Caroline’s discussion of the changes of her environment. The policing of racialized spaces is active in the hyper-surveillance that is employed in the sonic environment. And like Morgan Jenkins points out, this policing has been in place since colonial times. And as we live in the society that is a product of white-supremacist colonization and (now) neo-liberal imperialism, the lack of sound becomes associated with “civilization” and order, just like Christianity, and the English and Spanish languages.

@CockyMF responded to Jenkin’s original tweet saying, “Article after article of white people calling the cops on old Dominican men playing dominos in front of the buildings they lived in for 20+ years. YT⁷⁸ people hate when their neighborhoods sound alive.⁷⁹” That last line is the reason I included this quote in this section. The reference to the control whiteness⁸⁰ exerts over

⁷⁷ Jerkins, Morgan. Twitter Post. November 13, 2022.

⁷⁸ ‘YT’ (pronounced: “white”) is used to refer to White people, and Whiteness. In this case, the reference is hegemonic whiteness that continues to reproduce white-supremacy (in all forms and iterations).

⁷⁹ The Cocky One. Twitter Post. November 13, 2022, 1:13 PM.

⁸⁰ See footnote 18 to view the definition of whiteness that I am using.

life, to the point where it would rather hear silence than life, is very powerful. Hegemonic whiteness has to employ systems of order that oppress others, in order to maintain its power. Thus, it makes sense that gentrification—which is often cited as a reiteration of white flight—seeks control over the sonic realm. The redevelopment of a place that gentrification projects seek to perform, requires a redevelopment of the sonic environment in order to make the environment more marketable.⁸¹ This is the sound praxis in which Dominican Yorkers reproduce sound in New York City.

2.2 The Racialization of Dominican Soundscapes

I find it useful to ground the intimacy of the sound policing of Dominicans to the intimate relationship they have to sound. Scholar Jhanique Lovejoy has conceptualized that Black people have “a black need for sound” that informs Black sound practices. This concept positions Black sonic practices not as a performance of Blackness, but instead that Blackness is inextricably tied to sound.

The Black sonic body has the embodied historical memory and blackness as well as an association of joy and thriving to our musical practices. Our auditory investigations and sonic race-based epistemologies are our desires to remember. The remembering of the Black sonic body is imperative to our survival; this is the Black need for sound.⁸²

This chapter began with an introduction to sonic knowledge and sound identity to understand how Dominicans interact with soundscapes. “A black need for sound” expands our understanding of sonic knowledge as one that is embodied, just like a black sense of place. Lovejoy claims that Black sound practices stem from a desire to remember, allowing the sonic

⁸¹ Read: desirable.

⁸² Lovejoy, “The Black Need for Sound: Understanding Black Musicality and Race-Based Epistemologies,” page 8.

spaces of encounter to also be a space of *remembering* of histories, bodies, and relationships. And thus in the sonic realm this need to remember becomes a black need for sound. I claim that dominicanes ausentes have a black need for sound to remember and *remember* their knowledge of dominicanidad.⁸³ This desire is present in the usage of Dominican urban knowledge in New York City. The sound practices of Dominicans that create a Dominican sound identity for Washington Heights are a daily embodiment/practices of remembrance.

“The remembering of the Black sonic body is imperative to our survival.” This need is both born out of policing and continues to live in response to it. Caroline describes the soundscape of Inwood⁸⁴ through memory, but more of the past than the present. Throughout our conversation she continues to insinuate that this is how she knows her community to be, but that it is changing and these memories aren’t as present in the present anymore. “Dyckman sounds most Dominican at night,” she says. And noise complaints threaten the *remembrance* of dominicanidad that is essential to dominicanidad ausente. In ausencia, sonic practices become acts of remembering, returning and reconnecting with the Dominican Republic.

Not only are these Dominican transnational spaces threatened by gentrification, but so are the nightclubs, lounges, and restaurants that have always been located ground level, under apartment buildings. This is sound policing; hegemonic classes take it upon themselves to make sound hypervisible in moments in which they want to enforce a territorial paradigm of control. The desire to remember and exist that is expressed through sound becomes suppressed to control the attachment people can form to the space through the soundscape. This is the praxis within

⁸³ Here, I make both a reference to the recovery of collective memory and of dominicanisms.

⁸⁴ Inwood is a neighborhood in Uptown Manhattan that comes right after Washington Heights, beginning with Dyckman Avenue.

which sound, space and society are located for migrant communities. Pushed to the margins, and policed when the margins become desirable spaces to own and redevelop.

3. Articulating Presence and Belonging

3.1. The Role of the Phatic in Transnationalism

The economic, laboral, social, political, religious, etc. networks that Dominicans participate in are formed and informed via particular communication practices. Caroline described that her grandmother easily starts a conversation with a lady on the bus through a compliment, leading into greetings and exchanges of blessings. The familiarity that Dominicans have with each other is employed in forming communication channels. Whether Caroline's grandmother ever sees that lady again, she will still have a trail of her phatic labor because that lady may tell someone that she met a nice older, Dominican lady on the bus. This memory will influence how others see older, Dominican women; and as for Caroline's grandmother, the pleasant conversation will influence her to continue to talk to other Dominican women on public transportation because of her positive experience. Community is produced through the formal and informal, conscious and unconscious efforts of *phatic labor*.

Julia Elyachar builds off of Bronisław Malinowski *phatic communion*⁸⁵ and Karl Marx notion of labor to coin the phrase ‘*phatic labor*⁸⁶’ to account for the labor “...that produces communicative channels that can potentially transmit not only language but also all kinds of semiotic meaning and economic value...a social infrastructure on which a project oriented around the pursuit of profit could be constructed.”⁸⁷ This defines phatic labor as producing communicative channels that act as vital infrastructure for communal development. I extend Elyachar’s notion to explore the laboriousness of speech as part of the sonic infrastructure that creates and maintains social relations, allowing for the exchange of information and capital. Dominicans (who don’t know each other) often talk to each other as if they’ve known each other for a long time. This is the success of semiotic phatic communion that ensures a mutual understanding of intention and information; a learned behavior that Dominicans migrate and utilize to build community.

In order to understand the construction of urban dominicanidad ausente, we need to understand dominicanes ausentes as *human infrastructure*. From the work of Claudio Sopranzetti on the role that motorcycle drivers play in circulating information, people and resources in Bangkok, Thailand, urban residents, commuters and laborers are the human infrastructure that control the order and circulation for these urban economies.⁸⁸ I argue that dominicanes ausentes

⁸⁵ Malinowski understood phatic communion as “bonding by language” for the purpose of establishing connections, without necessarily communicating information. Laver adds onto this incomplete concept to emphasize that the communication of information is important and always present: phatic communion is used to “[detail] management of interpersonal relationships during the psychologically crucial margins of interactions.” Meaning that language conveys more than what is being said, and those nuances are the essence of the construction of communicative channels during times of communion and beyond. Senft, “Phatic Communion,” page 231.

⁸⁶ It can also be understood as speech as labor. This term is essential because it relates back to my foundational framework (that I borrow from Lorgia) of using *contradictions* to recover and reconstruct histories.

⁸⁷ Elyachar, “Phatic labor, infrastructure, and the question of empowerment in Cairo,” page 453.

⁸⁸ Sopranzetti, *Owners of the Map*.

are human infrastructure to the transnational networks they construct. They are significant to the production of dominicanidad ausente because they hold the knowledge and bodily experience that informs the practices and ideology. Using Sopranzetti's definition of infrastructure, we can place dominicanes ausentes as the main infrastructure sustaining this transnational cultural identity.

Three elements are central to infrastructure. First, infrastructure is an ever-changing system. It is not just a thing, an object, or even a network, but an assemblage...that, by acting as a system, enables and disables particular types of actions. Second, the kind of actions that infrastructures allow or restrain always revolve around circulation...they are not just assemblages, but assembling devices...Third, infrastructures are defined by a complex relationship between visibility and invisibility"⁸⁹

In using this definition of infrastructure, we are able to construct an urban dominicanidad ausente that relies on dominicanes ausentes as an 'assemblage' that circulates information, people and resources to negotiate the citizenship that this group of migrants is awarded within their place of destiny and in their nation of origin. They are inherently the 'assembling devices' of this social concept as they consciously and unconsciously articulate their presence and belonging. This articulation occurs as a navigation of the material reality around them that makes them hypervisible subjects to be controlled, thus making them invisible citizens in need of order.

This application of urbanity is the foundation for the semiotic language and activity that is used to develop communities concerned with supporting migrants through safe havens and community centers. I claim that the development of transnational Dominican communities and spaces, like the ones that I analyze in New York City, require phatic communion and phatic labor to develop. This migrant community has to talk to each other to stay connected and up-to-date on the variety of needs and lived realities within their community.

⁸⁹ Sopranzetti, Owners of the Map, page 72.

3.2. *The Need to Study the Role of Sound*

I utilize these ethnomusicology methods to illustrate the role of sonic expression and sonic knowledge in constructing how dominicanes ausentes interact with each other and their sonic environments. My goal is to prove that sound is a significant tool that Dominicans use to articulate their belonging to dominicanidad ausente and to New York City. These articulations allow them to *remember* and reconstruct dominicanidad outside of the Dominican Republic, building strong transnational networks.

This project was born out of the question: What is the role of music in Dominicans' desire to return to origin? And before that, the question was: What is the evidence that Dominicans desire to return to origin? My answer to this question was: music. Everywhere you go uptown you hear Merengue, Bachata, Perico Ripiao, Reggaeton, Spanish Trap, Drill, Dominican Rap, Palo Music, Salsa, and most interesting, Dembow music. The strong presence of dominicanidad in the soundscape of Uptown led me to believe that (1) Dominicans are present, (2) we continue to reproduce spaces to be Dominican by sounding Dominican, and (3) we listen to the same music in DR and in NYC. It is not surprising to hear the same bachata, merengue and salsa songs in both places, however Dembow is more significant. As I mentioned in a previous vignette, I often heard the same Dembow songs that referenced specific neighborhoods in the Dominican Republic and/or particular boroughs in NYC. It is the way songs are able to capture and construct places in ways that others are able to add to the imaginaries⁹⁰ of these places. It

⁹⁰ Once again, my usage of 'imaginaries' references that collective memory and conceptualization we carry via word of mouth and media. I specifically am discussing how Dominicans in DR are able to contribute to/participate in the imaginary of the Bronx by listening to a song that mentions that Bronx in the Dominican Republic. The repetition and performance of the lyrics allows for these spaces to live outside of NYC. This allows for those who have not traveled to the Bronx to be able to understand it in comparison to their environment.

was this ability—to present the Bronx in a Dembow song as a place that Dominicans in the Dominican Republic could feel was familiar to their environments—that left me awestruck at the power of music. And from this I exclaim: there is a need to study the role of sound in the construction, navigation, and reproduction of urban environments.

What about New York City allows Dominicans to map Dembow onto the physical and sonic realm? Why was “Toco Toco To” such an infectious song, and why was it attributed to Dyckman nightlife?⁹¹ I have tried to answer these questions by exploring the role of sonic knowledge and sonic expression in how urban dwellers navigate, understand and perform in these environments. Since Dembow music was born in the *bajo mundo*, it translates well to the neighborhoods that Dominican Yorkers inhabit in New York City. My interviews with young Dominican Yorkers evidence the influential role that music as sound has on New Yorkers. It has impacted their sense of belonging, and their awareness of their environments. And through the urgency proclaimed by the black need for sound, the study of sonic expression as a means of remembering for the sake of survival becomes even more necessary when seeking to understand how New Yorkers live in a city that doesn’t (always) love them back.⁹²

Here, I will return to the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter: “When Blackness and Black expression is so policed we must allow ourselves to be Black, sonically or otherwise.”⁹³ Sonic expression is an articulation of self and a performance of resistance. Taking into account the surveillance and paradigms of control that construct the oppressive systems that target Black

⁹¹ Dixson Waz, “Toco Toco To.”

⁹² When I claim that the city does not (always) love New Yorkers back, I am referencing the disenfranchisement that constructed poverty, food deserts, underfunded school districts, over policing, etc. unjustly enforced on the lives of working-class Black and Brown and migrant communities in the City. Cultural appropriation and commodification for tourism is not love; unaffordable rent is not love; overvaluing property over humanity is not love. I am not referencing the relationship New Yorkers have to each other, but instead the lack of care and support that is mobilized by the city government and elite.

⁹³ Lovejoy, “Black Need for Sound: Understanding Black Musicality and Race-Based Epistemologies.”

people across the diaspora, our sonic practices become necessary performances to use to navigate our conditions, and express our desires and needs. This quote reflects the relationship Dominican people have to music, given the government's history of music censorship. The diaspora carries these memories in its practices and characteristics.

How do Dominican Yorkers express their cultural and physical belonging in a city that does not love them back? What can and does Dembow music offer the Dominican diaspora? How will it contribute to the expansion of the realities and possibilities of dominicanidad? This is both where we end, and where we begin to move towards a new understanding of urban dominicanidad ausente through sonic expression and knowledge.

Chapter 3:

Dembow as the Contemporary Sound of Urban

dominicanidad Ausente

Se acabó la cuarentena (ya se acabó)
 (Quarantine has finished (its over))
 El cuerpo lo sabe y la calle está llena (ya)
 (The body knows and the streets are full (now))
 Se acabó la cuarentena
 (Quarantine has finished)
 El cuerpo lo pide, la calle está llena (no' fuimo')
 (The body is asking for it and the streets are fill (we out))⁹⁴
 “Se Acabó La Cuarentena,”
 Jowell & Randy, Kiko El Crazy

In the midst of all the sonic changes The Heights was going through during the pandemic, in August 2020 this Dembow song by Kiko El Crazy became a viral summertime anthem. An energetic Dembow song proclaiming that quarantine was over and we would all be partying outside brought comfort to many both in Washington Heights, my physical community, and across social media platforms. Produced in the Dominican Republic, that summer I heard the song every day blasting across The Heights and on every party playlist – it was definitely a central piece of the season’s soundscape. Music is an avenue through which I have learned to navigate these questions, and express my sense of self and belonging to dominicanidad.

As I began elaborating in the previous chapter, when people come Uptown (including the Bronx), Dominican music fills urban space, making it part of the sound identity of Dominican

⁹⁴ I have chosen to translate this epigraph in the text instead of in the footnotes to allow the reader to immediately encounter the translation, to convey the importance of the lyrics.

spaces. This chapter is about how dembow music is the sonic construction of dominicanidad ausente. First, I begin with a history of merengue and bachata as sounds of Dominican migration. Second, I provide a history of Dembow as a music genre that is the product of Caribbean musical exchanges that have become an intimately Dominican construction. Third, Dembow is an urban sonic construction that reflects the urban dominicanidad that Dominican migrants in NYC experience and reproduce. They use the music to navigate their realities, and articulate their belonging to the place and space they inhabit. They build community through their sonic presence. Lastly Dembow is the sound identity to Dominican spaces in NYC. Through dembow, many Dominican Yorkers articulate their belonging Dominican spaces, expanding their dominicanidad outside of the borders of the dominican state.

1. The Sounds of dominicanidad Ausente

For migrants and their descendants, expressions of belonging and self tend to coexist with expressions of longing and return. This project began with the question: how do my family members navigate through their desire to return while working and building a future in New York City? What role does desire play in contemporary Dominican migration/travel to the Dominican Republic)? What role does music play in navigating this desire?

When I ask my family members these questions, I am often asking them to myself first.⁹⁵ How do I navigate being *ni de aquí, ni de allá*⁹⁶? What role does desire to return to the

⁹⁵ How do I navigate being *ni de aquí, ni de allá* (not from here, nor from there)? What role does desire to return play in my day-to-day life? How does *migración de no retorno* shape my relationship with dominicanidad? How have I used music as a medium to express this desire and *migración de no retorno*?

⁹⁶ Translation (not from here, nor from there); I am first-generation American, meaning that all of my family members (including siblings) were born and raised in the Dominican Republic. Meaning that I am part of the first

Dominican Republic play in my day-to-day life? How does *migración de no retorno* shape my relationship with dominicanidad? How has transnationalism⁹⁷ shaped my sonic environment? How have I used music as a medium to express my desire and *migración de no retorno*?

I landed on Dembow because it is doing something important in relation to navigating Dominican identity and belonging in the Heights. While Dembow and so-called “musica urbana” (urban music) felt the most authentic to my experience as part of Dominican-American youth in the Heights, it was Merengue and Bachata that taught me about the experiences and sentiments of the adults around me. Boom. There it is. The soundscape I grew up within.

1.1. Merengue and Bachata in Sounds of Ausencia

As you’ve probably noticed by now, I grew up in a sonically active and vibrant space. Even though there was always a sea of people commuting through the Heights, it was their musical expressions which helped me the most *see* and *feel* the Dominicaness in this space. The experience of growing up in such an intensely musical environment was engulfing because it was loud and persevering. On cold days, on holidays, on monotonous days, there was always a sound in the distance reminding me that Dominicans were alive, and just outside my window.

generation of my family to learn dominicanidad entirely in a foreign space. In this case, ‘*ni de aquí, ni de allá*’ expresses my lack of full belonging to either place.

⁹⁷ A reminder of my definition of Dominican transnationalism: *Lorgia García Peña asserts that there is a wound in Dominican identity embodied by (1) the border the Dominican Republic shares with Haiti, and (2) the border the Dominican Republic shares with the United States. The condition of these two borders is essential to transnationalism, as it is essential to Dominican identity. Dominicanidad is defined by a type of transnationalism shaped and continuously defined by these two borders. Making the Dominican migrant an embodiment of these two borders, situating Dominican transnationalism within and outside of these two borders.*

Most commonly in my childhood, Bachata and Merengue music defined me and my home space. The music of bodegas is exemplary of what a Dominican soundscape feels like; Dominican Bodegas recreate a Dominican homespace in an American environment. Bodegueros⁹⁸ often cater to a wide customer community but carry Dominican brands and products. Part of Dominican authenticity is also performed through the musical sounds and sonic behaviors that are normalized in these hybrid Dominican spaces outside of the Dominican Republic. For instance, bachata and merengue music is the default, regardless of whether the tunes tell a happy or sad tale. Music plays loudly inside Bodegas and therefore it is in the sounds of typical⁹⁹ Dominican music that the Bodega finds an authentic backdrop. But perhaps most importantly, the bodega is also a place of migrant communion. A Dominican from the eastern part of the DR might walk in and be greeted by a Dominican from the western part of the country and find common ground in conversing about certain food items and/or national politics, all in colloquial Dominican vernacular.¹⁰⁰

1.1.1. “*Vine A Decirte Adios*” (*I Came to Say Goodbye*) by Frank Reyes¹⁰¹

I will now continue introducing the sounds of *ausencia* (absence) and migration through Bachata. One of these musical genres is known as *musica de amargue*.¹⁰² Anthropologist Deborah Pacini Hernandez defines it as, “songs expressing the pain of disillusion and separation” which in the case of Dominicans have been and “are so common that the word used to refer to

⁹⁸ Bodegueros are the men who usually run an/or own Bodegas.

⁹⁹ Typical because it is most commonly associated to Dominicans because the genres descend from the Dominican Republic.

¹⁰⁰ Later referred to as, *jerga* and *dominicanismos*.

¹⁰¹ Frank Reyes, “*Vine A Decirte Adios*.”

¹⁰² Translates to: *bitter music*. However, bitter is not nuanced enough to used instead of ‘amargue.’

that pain—amargue—has become synonymous with bachata as the name to identify the musical genre—*musica de amargue*.”¹⁰³ While Hernandez was discussing the pains associated with love, sexuality and gender, this pain also resonates with that of migration and separation. For example, “Vine A Decirte Adios” by Frank Reyes illustrates how Dominicans use music to navigate *ausencia* and desire.

Vine a decirte adios
 (I came to say goodbye)
 Me voy a otra tierra
 (I am going to another land)
 No se cual es mi rumbo
 (I do not know what my destination/path is)
 Mi amor esperame
 (My love, wait for me)
 Allí te extrañaré
 (I will miss you over there)
 por lo que hemos vivido
 (For all that we have lived)
 Verás que no te olvido por lejos que yo esté
 (You will see that I will not forget you, no matter how far away I am)

I first learned of the longing and painful yearning that migration can produce from this song. When my parents left for the US in the late 90s, this song became embedded in my family’s mind as the emotional tune of separated families and new unknown places. At home this song was not allowed to be played in my house because it would make my sister upset at the memories of my mother and father leaving to live in the US when she was only 4 years old. It took her many years to be able to listen to the song without associating it to *ausencia*.¹⁰⁴ While Reyes is writing romantic *musica de amargue* detailing the separation between a man and a woman, the lyrics resonate beyond romance. The verse begins with, “I came to say goodbye/ I

¹⁰³ Pacini Hernandez, “Cantando la cama vacía: Love, Sexuality and Gender Relationships in Dominican Bachata,” page 358.

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter 1 Section 4 for an in-depth analysis of *ausencia*.

am going to another land/ I do not know what my path is/My love, wait for me:” illustrating the bitterness of migration and its movement.

Reyes then continues saying, “I will miss you over there/ for all that we have lived/ You will see that I will not forget you, no matter how far away I am.” I suggest that this sentiment, this long-term yearning that Reyes’s song conveys, is also central to *dominicanidad ausente*. *Musica del amargue* is a sound of *dominicanidad* and *dominicanidad ausente*. Migration of no-return is informed by the historical conditions of *dominicanidad ausente*, shaping the desire to return to origin (read: home and loved ones) that Dominican migrants are experiencing.

1.1.2. “*Volvio Juanita*” by Milly Quezada

Another classic musical expression of *dominicanidad ausente* is Milly Quezada’s “*Volvio Juanita*,” a holiday anthem for travelers and their families.¹⁰⁵

Volvió Juanita y dijo que no volvía
 (Juanita returned and she said she wasn’t returning)
 Volvió con una maleta cargada de lejanías
 (She returned with a suitcase full of souvenirs)

 Que bonita se ve llegando del aeropuerto
 (How beautiful she looks arriving from the airport)
 Regresando otra vez a su gente y a su pueblo...
 (Returning once again to her people and to her town...)

This song is a staple in Dominican family gatherings. Whether you’re traveling back to DR or visiting family outside of DR, reunions are synonymous with returning to origin. We know that Dominican people are not exclusively located in the DR and neither is their *dominicanidad*. Quezada’s song becomes a medium through which *dominicanidad ausente* is

¹⁰⁵ Milly Quezada, “*Volvio Juanita*.”

represented and celebrated as a crossing of borders. This song is so iconic that “Juanita” is often used to refer to a viajera (traveler f.) in general and “llegó Juanita” is often said to viajeras or female travelers. If used to refer to someone who travels frequently, it becomes a sarcastic joke about how the female traveler says she is going to stay elsewhere (or here) but always ends up returning (or going away); or vice-versa, often migrants returning to destiny are also greeted with these terms – “volvio Juanita” here means, welcome back, traveler. And if she travels infrequently it becomes an exclamation of arrival and return, as in, “Returning once again to her people and to her town...” Indeed, “Volvio Juanita” thus illustrates the joys and celebrations of return and reunion that motivate dominicanidad ausente is motivated by.

1.1.3. From “Dominicano Soy” to “Soy Domi”

These next two songs are useful for understanding the way music becomes a sonic register through which members of the Dominican diaspora engage with each other. Both of these songs try to represent dominicanes ausentes and their dominicanidad revolving around nostalgia for past belonging, thus actively cementing the expansions of dominicanidad in the sonic realm.

Fernando Villalona’s “Dominicano Soy” is a Dominican classic that could easily substitute the DR’s national anthem.¹⁰⁶ He sings of his Dominican identity as something he carries in his veins and roots, making him one with the land of Quisqueya. The song feels humble and grateful, allowing it to resonate with all Dominicans across social classes and racial groups.

Dominicano soy
(I am Dominican)

¹⁰⁶ Fernando Villalona, “Dominicano Soy.”

De mis raíces yo no voy a olvidarme
 (Of my roots I will not forget)
 Soy de una loma y lo llevo en la sangre
 (I am from a mountain and I carry it in my blood)
 Montecristeño por la gracia de Dios ...
 (Montecristeño by the grace of God)

For Dominican Independence day in 2023, Centro Cuesta Nacional (CCN) curated a remix of this song under the hashtag “#OrgulloDeMiTierra” (Pride of my land).¹⁰⁷ The video features several popular Dominican figures, artists and music producers.¹⁰⁸ Each singer remixed a verse to illustrate the multiplicity of dominicanidad that the song attempts to bring together initially attempted to unite. The Youtube description stated, “Que se sienta desde dónde sea que estemos, ¡arriba nuestra patria, arriba nuestra República Dominicana!” (May you feel it from wherever we are, hurray to our mother land, hurray to our Dominican Republic). Refreshingly, the remix begins as a ballad and transitions into an infectious Dembow, creating an opportunity to expand the representation of Dominicanidad *through* Dembow.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, most of the artists that were part of the remix of the classic song are Dembow artist and Rappers, both genres which are conventionally seen as urban sounds¹¹⁰ instead of national Dominican sounds.¹¹¹ While this is a commercialization of “Dominicano Soy” by the business group CCN, it loudly states that Dembow music and Rappers are Dominican artists just like Fernando

¹⁰⁷ CCN, according to their LinkedIn description is a “ un grupo empresarial que enfoca sus esfuerzos en la industria de venta al detalle, ofreciendo el mejor servicio, la oferta más variadas de productos; Superando continuamente las expectativas del consumidor dominicano” (a business group that focuses their efforts on the retail industry, offering the best services, the most varied offer of products; continually surpassing the expectations of the Dominican consumer).

¹⁰⁸ Centro Cuesta Nacional (CCN), “Dominicano Soy.”

¹⁰⁹ I am hesitant to say that this is an inclusive and equitable project so I used *Dominicanidad*, instead of *dominicanidad* to illustrate this.

¹¹⁰ I don’t have someone to cite on this because I just know it to be true.

¹¹¹ Dembow and Rap music are often racialized and classed in an attempt to move them away from the national Dominicanidad.

Villalona, leading to an expansion of sonic expressions of Dominicanidad, not just *dominicanidad*.¹¹²

A few months before the remix came out, Kiko El Crazy released the Dembow song, “Soy Domi.”¹¹³

(Chorus)

Dominicano soy
 (I am Dominican)
 No ando en esa
 (I’m not with that)
 Hago mi dili' a donde voy
 (I do my due diligence wherever I go)
 Atrá' de lo' cualto' (let's get it)
 (I’m after the money (let’s get it))

Soy domi', soy domi', soy domi'
 (I’m Dominican x3)

Dominicano soy
 (I am Dominican)
 Soy domi', soy domi', soy domi'
 (I’m Dominican x3)

Dominicano soy
 (Dominican, I am)

This song is implicitly referencing Villalona’s “Dominicano Soy.” Through a fun, family friendly Dembow beat, Kiko El Crazy is able to gain a wide appeal with this contemporary remake of the Dominican *alt* national anthem.

¹¹² This sentence signifies that the national agenda is expanding. It is clear that the culture of self-identified Dominicans is much more expansive than that of the government, because it does not have a political agenda of exclusion to create a particular image of Dominicans and their culture.

¹¹³ Kiko El Crazy, “Soy Domi.”

Now, I would like to turn to the music video produced for the song. The first half of the video takes place in DR and then it moves into New York City. In this interlude,¹¹⁴ you see Kiko El Crazy and El Cherry Scóm wearing “Dominican Power” hoodies,¹¹⁵ getting ready to spread snow on the streets of New York City. The scenes then proceed to Kiko working as a Barber in NYC and buying food at a Bodega. The video makes a clear attempt at including the diaspora through various markers of the sounds and scenes associated with dominicanidad ausente in New York.¹¹⁶

These songs illustrate how the way Dembow has made its way into Dominicanidad needs to be understood in relation to bachata and merengue as musical genres that carry the history of diaspora and the present force of dominicanidad ausente. When I asked my interviewees about their relationship to Dembow, they directly tied it to their relationship with Bachata and Merengue:

Patricia: How would you describe your relation to Dembow? Can you talk about a specific song or artist that comes to mind with this question?

Jazmin: *Right now I feel like it's definitely interesting seeing—like especially as an artist—like how mainstream [Dembow] become in the Western media. And like how Latin music—like even in like the Latin charts and like other people, are wanting to participate in Dembow culture—So I guess my relationship to it—It's like nice to see it in the mainstream...Back then Bachata and Merengue was like the mainstream for our parents*

¹¹⁴ Kiko El Crazy, “Soy Domi.”

¹¹⁵ I don't have space above to explain the significance of them wearing those hoodies, so I will do it here. The Dominican Power hoodies are a representation of Dominican transnational identity in Uptown Manhattan. They are only available in Inwood, Manhattan, and they represent the saying, “de RD pal' mundo!” (From DR to the world!).

¹¹⁶ As I discussed earlier, the Bodega is an important space of phatic communion where Dominican sound practices are used to build connections and community.

*and stuff. Now for us—like—it's probably gonna be like Dembow and Reggaeton and shit, like that moving forward. And that's what we're probably gonna pass down to like our kids. It's like mad interesting!*¹¹⁷

Jazmin describes Dembow as a Dominican sound that she gravitates towards in a sea of Latin music. Her dominicanidad ausente exists alongside her position as a Latinx person in the US (and The West). She is curious about other people's desire to listen to and participate in Dembow culture outside of the Dominican Republic. As an artist, it allows her to see part of herself in the mainstream. Bachata and Merengue have already entered the western Latin American and Latinx mainstream and have become popular Latin genres, not just Dominican music. Dembow's entrance into the mainstream leads her to think that it will represent an intergenerational shift in the expression and construction of dominicanidad.

[\[One more paragraph connecting to the next section\]](#)

2. “Si tu quiere Dembow¹¹⁸”

2.1. *A Trans-Caribbean Sonic Production*

Dem bow, dem bow, dem bow
 Jump around gyal if you know you nuh bow
 Push out your hand, if you know you don't bow
 Whine up your line, if you know you don't bow
 You long up your mouth like mi momma, how so?
 Mi don't nyam pig, but mi love nyam cow

¹¹⁷ Interviewee Jazmin.

¹¹⁸ Reference to Pablo Piddy's 2010 song, “Si tu quiere Dembow.”

Freedom fi black people, come now

Dat mean say the oppressors dem, just bow¹¹⁹

One history of Dominican Dembow starts in Kingston, Jamaica with Shabba Ranks' 1990 "Dem Bow" dancehall song. However, it also strated in Panama with Nando Boom's 1991 Spanish remix of Ranks' "Dem Bow" called "Ellos Benia (Dem Bow)" which inspired Panamanian Spanish-reggae artist El General to make his own version of the song, "Son Bow." Through these songs, this dancehall riddim with Spanish vocals spread fast throughout the Spanish Antilles. In Puerto Rico, artists further developed this Panamanian-Jamaican sound into Reggaetón music, or at the time *reggae rap* in Spanish. In the Dominican Republic, DJ Boyo "El Papa del Dembow" (The Father of Dembow) was doing something different with the Jamaican dancehall riddims. In his "Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton," Ethnomusicologist Wayne Marshall distinguished between the sounds produced in Jamaica, Panama, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic:

The same dancehall riddims that were popular and heavily sampled in Puerto Rico's proto-reggaetón scene in the 1990s are the ones that Dominican producers continue to employ, even as Jamaican dancehall and Puerto Rican reggaetón have largely moved on: dembow, fever pitch, drum song. In Dominican dembow, it's common to combine elements from these riddims, and more, in the same production, layering them and alternating between them, which is something that never happens in Jamaica. Moreover,

¹¹⁹ Translation from Jamaican Patios: "They bow, they bow, they bow/ Jump around girl if you know you don't bow/ Push out your hand, if you know you don't bow/ Whine up your line, if you know you don't bow/ You put out your tongue like my momma, how so?/ I don't eat pig, but I love to eat cow/ Freedom for Black people, come now/ That means to say the oppressors they just bow"

*in contrast to the approach of Playero and the Noise in '90s Puerto Rico, Dominican dembow increases the density of these references, as well as the tempos.*¹²⁰

In her Dembow history article, “Recognizing Dominican Dembow: From Jamaica to El Alfa”, Dembow Historian and columnist Jennifer Mota states her reasons as to why Dembow hasn’t gained international success like Spanish Reggae and Reggaeton:

“1) The urban Dominican vernacular, *el barrio lingo*, has little support inside or outside the island; 2) the country's socio-economic situation makes many urban artists focus only on short-term, local success; and 3) the government's consistent, aggressive stance against urban music limits wider appeal.”

Dembow is a pillar of Dominican contemporary culture, *la cultura urbana*. The existence of Dembow as a product of Black sound within Latinidad, makes it a site of difference, confrontation and surveillance. As Jennifer describes, the government positions the language, the artists, and the context of Dembow against its ideal construction of Dominicanidad. This lack of support is a product of the oppression that marginalized, racialized communities live under in the Dominican Republic due to systemic oppression. The sound praxis of Dembow works against the anti-Black racial democracy that the Dominican Republic promotes and enforces, policing and controlling Blackness to align with its narrative of territorial control and anti-Haitianism. These conditions make Dembow a site of difference and confrontation where Dominican Blackness and *cultura urbana* take full reign over their articulation of self and positionality. While this makes

¹²⁰ Mota, Jennifer, “Recognizing Dominican Dembow: From Jamaica to El Alfa.”

the music more raw, it makes it more difficult for artists to be able to live off of their popular music, limiting the relationship they can strike between affordability and popularity.¹²¹

2.2. *“Dominicano de pura cepa”*¹²²

Dembow, the child of Reggae and cousin of Reggaeton, is intimately Dominican. The instrumentals, the language, the dances and the culture around it are all dominicanismos; they are expressions of dominicanidad. It is this specificity that makes Dembow popular amongst Dominicans and coveted by those who aren't. It is an attractive sound, and the Dominican jerga makes it like no other. It is “de pura cepa,” of pure stock; a term often used by Dominicans to express their authenticity and belonging to the land, culture, and nation.

Given the intimate connection between Dembow and Dominican culture, I asked my interviewees how they would define Dembow to others, considering the rising appeal others¹²³ for Dembow music.

Patricia: *How do you describe Dembow to someone else who doesn't know much about it? Just to get an interpretation of what it means to you.*

Helena: *Okay, I think I would start off by like...I feel like I would draw a parallel to like the birth of hip hop. And I would be like, Dembow's like the sound that comes from like the Bajo Mundo of DR. Like it's Wawawa¹²⁴ music, that's really what it is. And it's like*

¹²¹ I did not have time to mention it here, but Dembow also has a distinctive dance culture that is both a mix of outside Hip Hop influences and unique construction of dominicanidad.

¹²² ‘De pura cepa’ translates to: *of pure stock; authentic*. It is a common phrase used to emphasize how intimately and/or authentically Dominican something and/or someone is.

¹²³ Mainly other Latin Americans, Latinos, Spaniards, and Americans.

¹²⁴ ‘Wawawa’ in this case is used to make reference to the music’s association to the Dominican bajo mundo culture.

younger people just putting together like these sounds that they've heard in other places and that feel familiar to them. It's all coming from a place of trying to have a good time, and that's what Dembow's associated with.

By connecting the development of Dembow to the birth Hip Hop, Helena defines Dembow as the musical production of marginalized urban communities¹²⁵ in the Dominican Republic. Similar to Hip Hop, Dembow was born in the urban ghettos known as “the Bajo Mundo” and served as a creative outlet to release physical and emotional tension. While Dembow is less political¹²⁶ than earlier Hip Hop MCs, it centers teteo culture. Dominican Rapper J Noa defines a teteo as “fiestas sin ‘previo aviso...una fiesta que se dio y ya” (a party without previous advertising...a party that just formed and happened).¹²⁷ Teteos take place in urban environments where space is limited and shared, making it an impromptu communal event. Dominicans know it to be true that “donde se juntan dos, se arma un coro” (where two people meet, a party is formed), meaning that Dominican get-togethers easily turn into functions where celebration and joy take reign. This is what Helena is referring to towards the end: the mixing of familiar and new sounds stems from a desire to create an infectious instrumental that will get people lit.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ I did not have time to do so in this project, but it is important to contextualize the urban population in the Dominican Republic. Most of the cities in the DR are overpopulated with rural migrants who had to travel towards the cities for job opportunities, education and health. Neoliberal economic policies created forceful conditions that caused rural Dominicans to move towards the city due to economic strangulation and lack of social mobility.

¹²⁶ –In lyrics. I would argue that the act of creating Dembow can be political, even when politics are not being detailed.

¹²⁷ J Noa, ““@JNOA “Mi Barrio” (Documental Oficial) 2023 | Noise Colectivo.”

¹²⁸ ‘Lit’ is common English slang that refers to the joy and excitement that people experience at social gatherings and parties.

After asking for their definitions of Dembow, I also asked them about their attraction to Dembow music. As Dominicans who are surrounded by and engage with Dembow, “Why do you think people listen to Dembow? What is the appeal?”

Jazmin: *I think that like, one, it's something like, so different from anything we've ever heard... 'cause a lot of Dembow music is very exa–It's–it's exaggerations and a lot of like specific dominican jargon and a lot of specific Dominican humor that only we know, or [only] we understand, and I guess that's what appeals a lot too. It's like that feeling of exclusivity, but also like wanting everyone to like, know about it.*

But like because it's like a pride thing too...I feel like Dominicans are very prideful people, and...even just like the escapism part of it, too. Like again, it's just something that no matter what, it's going to bring joy like, it's just–It's gonna bring joy regardless.

The linguistic dominicanisms¹²⁹ found in Dembow separate it from its reggae and reggaeton roots. The Dominican *jerga* makes it intimately Dominican, and thus an articulation of dominicanidad. Jazmin describes that Dembow contains a lot of “specific Dominican jargon” and “specific Dominican humor” making it a reflection of Dominican culture and lived realities. The appeal, she argues, stems from the specificity and exclusivity of the understandings of the music. Yet, there is also a pride factor in having others, who are not Dominican, listen to the music and the dominicanisms present. While the music travels because of the rhythms of Dembow, there is pride in the articulation of dominicanidad in the language that accompanies the music.

¹²⁹ Translation of *dominicanismos*. Term (noun) describing traits of Dominicanidad, including language.

“La jerga dominicana,” also known as “los códigos del barrio” (the codes of the hood¹³⁰), is what distinguishes Dembow from other music genres in the Caribbean and Latin America. Even though Merengue and Bachata are deeply Dominican, the language used in both differs from that of the colloquial vernacular that has become representative of contemporary Dominican culture. With words like “tató”¹³¹ and phrases like “en olla,”¹³² Dembow artists have room to build on this dominicanismos and create more. Kiko El Crazy’s recent song exclaimed, “Tengo la pampara prendia’.”¹³³ In English, the closest translation for ‘la pampara’ would ‘swag.’ The song’s success skyrocketed by this new term, instead of it being a roadblock. Dominicans are accustomed to the creation and usage of new words and phrases in their everyday life.

Youtuber Alan Delmonte claims that we use jerga dominicana to navigate hedonic adaptation.¹³⁴ That language is reclaimed and used as a defense mechanism against the frameworks of oppression that rob us of autonomy and control of our community and individual life. Through los códigos of dominicanismos, people contribute to the social construction of dominicanidad, offering new forms of interaction and expression based in Dominican culture. This can allow people to construct an identity—outside of their material reality and the limitations imposed by it—rooted in the social worlds they have access to through this Dominican lexicon, allowing them to articulate belonging to these expansions of dominicanidad, rather than

¹³⁰ Much more than just street codes, los códigos refers to words and phrases created on the street that become part of daily Dominican diction.

¹³¹ ‘Tató’ means (I) got it. Not to be confused with ‘ta to’ which means (I) everything is—.

¹³² The words translate to *being in a pot*. The phrase itself translates to *being broke*.

¹³³ Alan Delmonte, “El Origen Del Dembow y la Fuerza de la Pámpara.”

¹³⁴ Wikipedia: “The hedonic treadmill, also known as hedonic adaptation, is the observed tendency of humans to quickly return to a relatively stable level of happiness despite major positive or negative events or life changes.”

Dominicanidad.¹³⁵ This power of language creates an intimate relationship between Dembow and its audience. Artists make songs for their communities that reflect and/or uplift their community, all while being honest to their material realities and the language they have to make sense of it.

Y aquellos códigos que surgen de los rincones prohibido de la sintaxis, y brasen por debajo de las rigideces de todas las reglas gramaticales, no solo se convierten en un especie de armamento para combatir las fuerzas opresoras como la pobreza, la violencia, y la carencia de oportunidades, sino que empujan el lenguaje a lugares donde reina la creatividad. Y donde la riqueza del lenguaje se camufla bajo un aparente manto de abandono lingüístico. Y sin darnos cuenta los ritmos y sus palabras renuevan el lenguaje, nos abren ventanas hacia realidades incomprendidas, introducen nuevos significados en nuestras vidas, y destruyen las divisiones entre razas, clases sociales, incluso fronteras. Permittiéndonos extender nuestras propias realidades más allá de los límites impuestos por nuestras condiciones de vida. Y es entonces cuando la musica y el lenguaje nos liberan.

(And those codes that surge in the prohibited corners of syntax and move under the rigidness of all the grammatical rules, not only do they convert themselves into weapons to combat oppressive forces like poverty, violence and the lack of opportunities, but they push the language to places where creativity reigns. And where the richness of language is camouflaged under a veil of linguistic abandonment. And without us noticing the rhythms and their words renew the language, they open windows to misunderstood realities, they introduce new meanings into our lives, and they destroy the divisions between race, social class, including borders. Allowing us to extend our own realities beyond the limits imposed by our daily conditions. And that is when music and language liberate us.)

3. How we get to “De Manhattan Pa El Bronx”

3.1. Urban Sounds of El Bajo Mundo

In the previous chapters I developed the idea of sonic knowledge and sound identity, and showed how urban dwellers develop and employ these tools and identity.¹³⁶ I emphasize that

¹³⁵ See section 2 in the Introduction to reference the difference between ‘Dominicanidad’ and ‘dominicanidad.’

¹³⁶ See Chapter 2 Section 1.2.

there is something particular about how sound is constructed and reproduced in urban spaces. As previously mentioned, soundscapes exist within a sound praxis that positions sonic productions in response to the sociopolitical systems and society that inform the social behaviors in the environment. In the Dominican Republic, Dembow has developed as a uniquely urban sound. Because it was constructed within the city and as a result of city life, it will always be a reference to urban life and behaviors. While you can take the sound out of the city, you cannot remove the city out of the sound! This urban DNA—composed by the language in the music, the methods of circulation, the places where it was made, the life conditions that artists write about, and the culture that is constructed around it—is what allows for Dembow music to travel to and be reproduced within Dominican spaces in NYC. It is a uniquely urban sound that references and speaks to city life and navigation. Allowing for dominicanos ausentes to use Dembow as an expression of their Dominican sonic knowledge and sound practices.

Here I want to discuss the *bajo mundo*, *the underworld* as the urban environment where Dembow is created. El bajo mundo greatly contributes to how Dembow is interpreted, its relatability/ transferability, and how it circulates. ‘Bajo mundo’ literally translates to ‘underworld,’ also synonymous with ‘barrio.’¹³⁷ It is a term used to refer to urban areas that are impoverished and neglected by the state.¹³⁸ Dembow culture has turned this initially negative term and made it into a source of pride that acknowledges the power in the space.¹³⁹ Using the

¹³⁷ Translates to ‘hood.’

¹³⁸ It is most often referring to the urban constructed ghettos in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. But, it does apply to most constructed urban ghettos that are continuously conditioned by racism, scarcity of resources and opportunities to increase socioeconomic mobility, hypervisibility and neglect, etc.

¹³⁹ Here I can mention that this power also exists in *contradiction*. That the Dominican government and ruling/elite class neglect the urban working class, and force them into poverty through systemic oppression to control their access to social mobility. Thus, to claim with pride that you are from the underworld, from the hood, from the disinvested place where you were left to yourself, and to show that you survive and that you experience joy in these places, nonetheless, becomes a political reclamation of space. And as Delmonte change, language gives you the

term ‘bajo mundo’ references the marginalization and poverty that the nation neglects and reproduces. Connecting back to Silvio Torres-Saillant’s description of migration as a forced exile, from el bajo mundo circulate a large quantity of Dominicans who migrate formally and/or informally.¹⁴⁰ The conditions of the Dominican bajo mundo cause emigration to the bajo mundos of wealthier nations, like parts of New York City where Dominicans work and reside.

In her interview¹⁴¹ on Radio Menea Podcasts, journalist and Dembow Historian Jennifer Mota exclaims the inseparable relationship between Dembow and *el barrio*.¹⁴²

People like Bad Bunny and J Balvin had no idea what to do with a Dembow. They didn’t know like how to create a verse on Dembow, they didn’t understand it. Um, when they were asked like, ‘oh, would you ever work on a Dembow’--J Balvin’s an example: he said, “I wouldn’t know what to do with a Dembow, like I don’t understand it.” And this past fall, “Que Calor” comes out and wow, you see like the improvement. But it also has to do with you actually experiencing the culture. Which is why the barrio is a super important aspect of its organic growth and the music. Um, especially the culture.

The reproduction of Dembow requires an understanding of urban dominicanidad. Mota tells us that for other artists to create a Dembow song, they need to first participate in Dominican culture to understand how to create with a Dembow beat. This implies that the genre of music is intimately Dominican from its sound and experience. It cannot simply be replicated, it has to be learned. Listening to and reproducing Dominican Dembow forces you to understand the language and how to vibe to it. The teteo and dance culture that come with Dembow are part of

ability to reframe your environment from a new position that is not limited by the conditions that surround, nor the demands of Dominicanidad.

¹⁴⁰ citation

¹⁴¹ Radio Menea, “Ep 110: Dominican Dembow with Jennifer Mota.”

¹⁴² Another term for ‘bajo mundo.’

this. You can apply other behaviors to the music, but that won't make it part of the culture just because it is playing in the background.

3.2. *Diasporic Connections as Opportunities for Contradictions*

As previously mentioned, Uptown Manhattan and the Bronx are often understood as Dominican spaces. Especially to the Dominican imaginary.¹⁴³ It is within these spaces that dominicanes ausentes navigate through and reconstruct their Dominican culture. As Dominican migrants circulate through the city, they carry with them their sonic practices and identities. This movement allows music to become a transborder realm in which Dominicans and dominicanidad are all located. This location allows for the articulation of dominicanidad to expand across borders, existing both in the DR and abroad at the same time.

A good example of this is the popularity of Dembow songs that take place both in DR and NYC. This project is named after a song written by NYC-based rapper Dowba Montana and DR-based artist El Cherry Scm, “De Manhattan Pa El Bronx.”¹⁴⁴ The song was so popular that I heard it both in DR while on vacation, and then once again when I returned back to NYC. Essentially the song talks about partying from Manhattan to the Bronx. I thought it was significant for an artist like Cherry Scm—who at the time had not yet traveled to NYC—to have

¹⁴³ When I use the term imaginary, I refer to the collective consciousness that Dominicans use and contribute to. This collective imaginary allows for information to be circulated, and narratives to be constructed. In this instance, to Dominicans in the DR, New York City is the imagined central hub for dominicanos ausentes. Families usually make sense of where you are in the US by your proximity to NYC. And within NYC, uptown Manhattan (Washington Height, Inwood and Sugarhill) is the center of Dominican life and activity in the US. This has become a collective idea, allowing for these spaces to be “imagined” centers of social interaction. Even though most Dominicans in NYC live in the Bronx, Uptown Manhattan will often take the crown in the imaginary as the center. However, that is not to say that the imaginary does not include the Bronx. (It does.) This was just an example of how I am employing this term.

¹⁴⁴ El Cherry Scm, Dowba Montana, “De Manhattan Pa El Bronx.”

been to sing about NYC with so much confidence and familiarity. It showed me that Dominicans in DR are also participating in the dominicanidad that Dominican migrants and their descendants are contributing to. My claim to belonging to the Dominican Republic is aligned with to El Cherry Scóm's articulation of existence in Dominican Spaces abroad. This is the revelation that is at the heart of this project.

Ando en alta en la calle, nadie me para
 (I'm the shit in the streets, no one can stop me)
 El Cherry Scóm con el Dowba Montana
 (El Cherry Scóm with El Dowba Montana)
 La hierba se bota por la ventana
 (you gotta through the weed out the window)
 (No me salude', que no somo' pana')
 ((Don't say hi to me, we're not buddies)

De Manhattan para el Bronx, de Manhattan para el Bronx
 De Manhattan para el Bronx, de Manhattan para el Bronx
 De Manhattan para el Bronx, de Manhattan para el Bronx
 De Manhattan para el Bronx, de Manhattan para el Bronx
 (From Manhattan to the Bronx, From Manhattan to the Bronx x4)

De Manhattan pa'l Bronx, any block we going
 (From Manhattan to the Bronx, any block we going)
 Nueva York, lo' teteo' en La Marina y Hunts Point
 (New York, the parties in La Marina and Hunts Point)

Imagine hearing this song in DR. Imagine hearing about La Marina, a nightclub that used to be in Inwood, Manhattan, and Hunts Point, a neighborhood in the South Bronx, in the countryside of the Dominican Republic with your family members that haven't traveled to the US and don't know what the life of dominicanos ausentes is like abroad. And here is this song to offer them a visual of where we get down, and to what we get down to. It does not come as a surprise to them that we listen to Dembow, but it comes as a shock to me when they sing along

to the chorus. “De Manhattan para el Bronx, de Manhattan para el Bronx,” they sing as they construct an imaginary¹⁴⁵ of what Dominican-spaces in NYC and abroad are like.

The song is relatable because it is about partying and having fun. Because this song brings dominicanidad ausente into the Dominican Republic, it reaffirms that Dembow is a borderless medium that allows for the exchanges and expansions of dominicanidad, all through the articulation of it.

And this is not the only song to do this. Popular Dembow artists Bulin 47 and Chimbala collaborated to create the 2020 hit, “El Juidero.”¹⁴⁶ At a time in which people were experiencing instability and immobility, this song presented an energetic outlet through which Dominicans could reconnect. In particular because the song had a dance attached to it, people were able to record videos of them dancing to it and share it with their family members in other places who were also doing the same.

<i>Yo 'toy loco porque pase e'ta vaina</i>	<i>(¡Ay!; ¡Ah, ya yo sé!)</i>
<i>(I can't wait for this shit to end)</i>	<i>(Ay, now I know)</i>
<i>Yo no aguanto, de aquí me voy por</i>	
<i>Haina...</i>	<i>Pa'l Bronx (Pa'l Bronx)</i>
<i>(I can't take it, from here I'm leaving</i>	<i>(To the Bronx)</i>
<i>through Haina..)</i>	<i>Pa' Manhattan (Pa' Manhattan)</i>
	<i>(To Manhattan)</i>
<i>Bríncale, sáltale, córrele, córrele</i>	<i>Pa' Brooklyn (Pa' Brooklyn)</i>
<i>Bríncale, sáltale, córrele, córrele</i>	<i>(To Brooklyn)</i>
<i>Bríncale, bríncale, bríncale, bríncale</i>	<i>Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania)</i>
<i>Sáltale, sáltale, sáltale, sáltale</i>	<i>Pa' Yonkers (Pa' Yonkers)</i>
<i>Córrele, córrele, córrele, córrele,</i>	<i>(To Yonkers)</i>
<i>¡Corre!</i>	<i>O pa' "Ta'cuare" ("Ta'cuare")</i>
<i>(Jump, Hop, Run, Run x3)</i>	<i>(Or to "Ta'cuare")</i>
<i>(¡Se armó el juidero!)</i>	<i>O Times Square (Times Square)</i>
<i>(The rush has started)</i>	<i>(Or Times Square)</i>
	<i>O pa' "Tacuer" (Pa' "Tacuer")</i>
<i>Dime, dime, dime pa'nde voy...</i>	<i>(Or to "Ta'cuare")</i>
<i>(Tell me x3, where should I go)</i>	

¹⁴⁵ See footnote 44 in Chapter 3 for reference on how I am using the term in this context.

¹⁴⁶ Chimbala, Bulin 47, “El Juidero.”

Not only is the Dembow riddim and instrumental super energetic, making you want to dance along whenever you hear it, but the lyrics are also relatable. Chimbala's first line, "I can't wait for this [Covid-19 pandemic] to end," sums up how most people felt during 2020. Craving a sense of normalcy, this first line hits home for everyone. And then, "I can't take it, from here I'm leaving through Haina," references an informal emigration route that many Dominicans take with goals to arrive in North America through Puerto Rico. This reference to emigration cites the magnified needs that the pandemic exacerbated for many Dominicans, both abroad and in DR, that would lead them to need to migrate in search of financial stability and economic mobility. Right off the bat, even though this is meant to be a lighthearted, funny song, it touches on some serious topics that are shaping Dominican society. As a scholar, I claim that through Dembow the conditions of Dominicans can be articulated as borderless because Chimbala discusses the impacts of economic strangulation and the Covid-19 pandemic broadly. By then singing, "Tell me, where should I go" and then listing off places in the US where Dominicans live, this song is overtly discussing the positions of contemporary Dominicans as global citizens who are in daily conversation with migration and transnationalism. This song is the site where contradiction is allowed to recover the constructed realities that Dominicans face under the constant threat of neoliberal economic policies, local oppression, forced migration, and global health crisis such as the pandemic. By including these difficult realities in light hearted songs, language is being used to make sense of the world, and as "weapons to combat oppressive forces" that might misrepresent our realities. Thus, through this song Dembow is being used to articulate an expansive form of dominicanidad that includes our joys and oppressive conditions.

4. Playlists and Podcasts¹⁴⁷

[Chapter 3.A Playlist](#) [Chapter 3.B Playlist](#)

Briefly, I want to end this chapter considering the podcasts and social media platforms that allow for Dembow music to circulate and la cultura urbana to grow. I want to shout out the original Alofoke.net that Santiago “Alofoke” Matias began as a blog and later turned into a media group all while centering Dominican urban music.

I want to introduce these podcasts to help me get to a different conclusion about Dominican transnationalism. Most transnational studies approaches to migration usually land or end with the assertion that Dominican identity is constructed through exchanges and circulation. That there are renegotiations that the dominicane ausente makes to assimilate to their destiny society with the integrity of their dominicanidad. Or perhaps, it is more of a process of learning and unlearning that is informed by new sociopolitical systems they live outside of the Dominican Republic. This process allows for an expansion of the possibilities of dominicanidad to fit the lived realities of Dominican migrants and their descendants as well. Especially, dominicanidad ausente and the liberty in reconstructing it outside of the gaze of the state. Somewhere within this process, music plays a role in constructing and expanding the belonging that migrants and their descendants have to their cultural identity. Certain podcasts and social media platforms enact a type of knowledge production that interprets/understands/theorizes/conceptualizes Dembow into a transnational theory of dominicanidad. Daily, they contribute to and deconstruct the songs,

¹⁴⁷ I was not able to further elaborate on this section in this paper, but I believe it is important that I include the music that this project is rooted in, as well as the media outlets that shape the music industry.

events, people and movements that are constantly informing la cultura urbana. This becomes important when we frame urban culture as the product of survival from and resistance to oppressive forces. It is a reclamation of social autonomy, allowing for an authentic representation of Dominican society under the sociopolitical conditions it is reproduced and reconstructed under.

From these podcasts, I have made my own efforts to connect with Dembow music by understanding both the people who create the music and those who listen to it. This project continues to be an attempt to understand how desire and belonging are navigated through sonic expression and music. I have tried to do justice to the material realities that have constructed and continue to inform dominicanidad for Black Dominicans who are marginalized, “kept in place” and “placeless¹⁴⁸,” and often pushed into forceful migration. While most of the songs in Chapter 3.B playlist are energetic songs meant for teteos,¹⁴⁹ they continue to push me to view them as acts of self-articulation, freedom dreaming,¹⁵⁰ and an expansion of dominicanidad. Just like Lorgia has positioned dominicanidad as a more inclusive construction than Dominicanidad, I claim that Dembow presents a similar encounter of contradiction and expansion.

¹⁴⁸ Mckittrick, Katherine, and Clyde Adrian Woods, eds. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. United States: *Between the Lines*, 2007.

¹⁴⁹ See page 80 for definition.

¹⁵⁰ I mention freedom dreaming not to romanticize the songs and their lyrical content, but instead to reference the liberation that Dominicans find in parties and social gatherings. These songs are meant to allow people to have fun, to invite them to move their bodies, and to have moments of escape into fun (sometimes illicit) pleasures. Thus, I am not referencing just the content of the song, but its function and contributions. The making of music also becomes a freedom dream for some artists as it may offer them creative expression, increased income and financial mobility, and an escape from both dangerous and limiting jobs. Here, I am positioning freedom as joy to express oneself and to be oneself in the midst of life threatening challenges.

Epilogue

1. Las Dembowseras and Exploring Gender Identity Through Dembow

Picture this: you're posted up under a tree next to a basketball in San Cristobal, Dominican Republic eating fritura (fried foods). In front of me, my mom and one of her younger cousins are talking over a plate of blood sausage, fried pork rinds, Dominican chicharron and fried tripe, all accompanied by some fried yuca and sweet potatoes. Sitting here, eating with toothpicks and sipping on some Presidente beer, el primo looked over to me to say, "Dime y tú, dembowsera?" "¿Dembowsera?" I said with a chuckle. "Tu 'anda con un flo de dembowsera," he told me.¹⁵¹ The "flo" in question were my box braids, baggy graphic t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. I looked back up and laughed. "Así e' qué andan lo' Americano," my mom said. I took a sip of my Presidente, contemplating what to say next. While I wasn't sure what he meant, I knew he was not fond of the trending style that young girls were rocking at the time due to Dembow's cultural influence. As a Dominican-American who lives in Washington Heights, my attire was normal to me and reflected where I was from. I was shocked that I blended in with the girls in DR because I often feel different or not Dominican enough in DR. And yet, at that moment, I was reflecting to him both the common and "unfavorable" aesthetics of la cultural urbana Dominicana: proud urban Blackness. While his comment was not discriminatory, it made note of the expectations versus reality of my gendered expression of dominicanidad via my physical attire. My aesthetics were both too Black, too boyish, and too *street* for his expectations of an

¹⁵¹ Translation of the conversation: "What's up with you, dembowsera?" "Dembowsera?" I said with a chuckle. "You walking around with the style of a dembowsera..." "This is how American's dress," my mom said.

American-born Dominican. Making me appear more like a contemporary Dominican girl than an American. Little did he know that I dressed like this before Dembow culture, and continue to do so after because I'm from New York City. This aesthetic is a source of pride for me because it represents where I come from, and who I am. Even though he was probably poking fun at me with the comment, I was actually really flattered to be called a dembowsera. In that moment, I found space for myself--from my identities to my gender expression—in Dembow culture. *Al fin, dominicana soy. Aquí y alla.*¹⁵²

Gendered violence is rampant in Dominican culture, and Dembow is not neutral to this influence. In a study done across 18 Latin American countries and territories, the DR ranked second highest in reported rates of femicide.¹⁵³ This is to say that all women—cis, trans and genderqueer—are subject to violence as well as lack of systemic support in the Dominican Republic.

Dembow music and culture is a reflection of our society, just like any other medium of expression. From the songs to the music videos, artists express their joys, turmoil, desires and sense of self. Therefore, the medium itself is not devoid of the presence and reproduction of classism, anti-blackness, misogynoir, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, etc. Hence why it is particularly important to highlight that the presence of Black women and queer folks in Dembow is an act of resistance against all forms of oppression. Dembow music's goal is to motivate and

¹⁵² Translation: "In the end, I am Dominican. Here and there."

¹⁵³ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. "ECLAC: At Least 4,473 Women Were Victims of Femicide in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2021." Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. CEPAL, December 20, 2022. <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/eclac-least-4473-women-were-victims-femicide-latin-america-and-caribbean-2021>.

energize, it is made for collective communion of celebrations and partying. And when Black women and queer folks make Dembow music, it pushes against the societal conditions that attempt to limit and dictate their lives for them. Dembow music pushes itself to the center of the stage and calls everyone into the teteo. So while many male Dembow artists reproduce misogyny, homophobia and xenophobia through their music, Dembowers continue to expand the genre to include multiple narratives of otherness that represent the Dominican experience.

It is from the constructed barrios that live under surveillance and economic strangulation that a song about a woman's sexual desire for other women becomes political. While the individuals at these functions are not actively engaging in activism, by dancing to explicit music that is often censored by the government they are engaging in emotional releases and phatic communion that allow them to reclaim their time, space, bodies and experiences. There is something special and significant about Dembow that attracts many people to it, and I claim that this is part of it. This is not to romanticize teteo culture. Rather, my attempt is to understand the power in the expansiveness of Dembow, and the power in its articulations of dominicanidad from the voices of the marginalized and excluded, from el bajo mundo.

Dembow does not have to speak for everyone. Yet, it appears to allow for greater space for certain types of otherness to exist within. Some may say the same about genres like Merengue and Bachata, and claim that they are neutral spaces from which we can all exist as Dominicans. However, this is not true. The oversaturation of the cis-heteronormative male gaze in these genres allows for Dominicanidad to control its articulation of nation, and the visibility of who is a citizen. So while we may often find liberation and joy in these genres, I argue that we may find even more expansiveness in Dembow. As a genre, it refuses borders, including gendered ones, and continues to disrupt silences and taboos. It is the vessel that younger

generations are using to express their dominicanidad and it is precisely through this disruly, deeply Dominican genre that Dominican-American women and queer communities find space to engage in conversation on their sexuality, gender identity and expression, and their relation to dominicanidad. We see it with artist Tokischa and we will continue to see it with other artists in the near future.

2. On the Possibilities Within Dembow

At this point, I want to return to the roots of this paper and address my understanding of dominicanidad ausente. I am deeply grateful to Lorgia García Peña, Silvio Torres-Saillant and Carlos Manuel Abaunza Carranza for their academic work that has intentionally put the conditions of the Dominican diaspora in conversation with the history of colonialism and neoliberal imperialism to expand our understanding of how Dominicans are positioned in the world. With the works of these three scholars, I have pushed myself to really analyze the ways in which my Dominican identity is shaped by the world. In this project I claim that dominicanidad ausente is the historical condition of Dominican diasporic identity and identification defined at once by the position of experiencing one's Dominican identity in relation to the yearning to return back to the Dominican Republic, all while actively asserting one's belonging to a diasporic Dominican community in the present and future. Here, nostalgia and diasporic pride co-exist. Nostalgia to return one's origin and/or place of heritage within the Dominican Republic. And diasporic pride in the reconstructions of dominicanidad that migrants and their descendants express their belonging to. As a Dominican-American—dominicana ausente—my sense of identity is informed the conditions of experiencing a pull the Dominican Republic and a

push towards Washington Heights and the Bronx. These physical spaces I live within and in-between.

In the process of identification, *ausencia* pushes you into a transborder space positioned by the borders that inform your reality: the Haiti-DR border, and the island's border to the United States. This is where I begin to find a paradox with *dominicanidad ausente*. The term 'dominicano ausente' was initially used by the Dominican government to categorize Dominican migrants' citizenship and (social, political and economic) participation. And yet, the Dominican government's usage of the term does not acknowledge their responsibility in the push out that creates this *ausencia*. This contradiction is constitutive of contemporary Dominican identity. Torres-Saillant draws from this contradiction to claim that Dominican migrants are often forced exiled due to the economic and political push-out they experience.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, Carranza Abaunza's work also builds from the contradiction to categorize Dominican migration of no return as forced and forceful, referencing the scars of the pushout many Dominican migrants carry. And thus, not only is *dominicanidad ausente* conditioned by nostalgia and diasporic belonging, it also conditioned by the paradox of being pushed out and held responsible for your formal and/or informal emigration. These paradoxes shape the transborder spaces you are pushed into through *ausentizaje*.¹⁵⁵ Largely informing the difficult migration journeys that await many 1st and 2nd generation migrants.

It is important to dig deep into our positions as Dominican Yorkers to understand the culture we construct, reconstruct and reproduce. This is how I came to understand Dembow as the contemporary sound of urban *dominicanidad ausente*. Dembow music addresses the contradictions of the complex conditions of exclusion and belonging co-existing to shape the

¹⁵⁴ Torres-Saillant, *El retorno de las yolas*, page 18.

¹⁵⁵ From the verb 'ausentar,' 'ausentizaje' (noun) references the act of being made absent

material realities of marginalized Dominicans, both in the DR and the diaspora. Through Dembow music the paradox is turned into irony to make contradictions apparent and palatable. As previously mentioned, Dembow music proves to hold expansive forms of identity exploration for both myself and my interlocutors because it handles issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality with critical irony. Where Bachata offers its listeners sincerity, Dembow offers critical and comical irony. It asserts dominicanidad by refusing to define it as a state-led discourse. Dembow's ultimate goal is to uplift and empower the voices and narratives from el bajo mundo, disrupting the invisibility imposed upon them.

From this I claim that Dembow is a transnational medium, positioned by the Haiti-DR and the United States borders, that performs dominicanidad. Through the evidence I have gathered from my textual analysis, the interviews with my interlocutors, the media-analysis, and my empirical knowledge of life in Washington Heights, Dembow's appeal and prevalence in diasporic Dominican spaces is because it represents the narratives of contemporary dominicans with more critical honesty than Bachata and Merengue music. We will see a rise in the popularity and influence of Dembow music in the years to come, I am excited for the ways in which it will expand and challenge our current constructions of dominicanidad.

Appendix: Interview Questions

1. I would like to start by talking about the environments that have informed who you are today. What kind of music did you grow up around? And what did you associate with these genres and/or artists?
 - a. Do you still have these associations today?
2. Were there distinctions between what your home, your neighborhood, and school environments sounded like? Can you speak more on this?
3. From your childhood to now, what has been your journey with music (as a listener and then artist)?
4. Do you think being from and living in NYC impacts how you perceive music?
5. How and when did you start listening to Dembow?
6. How would you describe your relation to Dembow? Can you talk about a specific song or artist that comes to mind with this question?
 - a. How does your gender identity impact your relationship to dembow?
 - b. What as a woman attracts you to dembow?
7. Where and when do you listen to Dembow? And with who?
8. How do you define Dembow and how would you describe this type of music to someone who has never listened to it before?
 - a. What themes do Dembow songs discuss?
 - i. And how does this impact how you relate to Dembow, and/or how you experience it while listening to it?
9. Why do you think people listen to Dembow? What is the appeal?
10. Do you have any comments on the circulation of Dembow music on Tik Tok?
11. How do you feel about transnational Dembow songs/artists like “[De Manhattan Para El Bronx](#),” “[Vamo Pal Bronx](#),” and “[El Judiero](#)” that directly make mention of Dominican spaces in NYC?
12. What is your relationship to Dominican spaces in NYC and how do you interact with them?
13. What are the sounds and/or types of music that you associate with Dominican spaces in NYC? What do you expect to hear when you’re in them?

14. Are familiar with the “Let me listen to my block,” line from Lin Manuel’s musical “In the Heights?” If so, how do you feel it represents Dominican spaces in Uptown Manhattan?
15. How have sounds associated with Dominican spaces in NY shaped your life and your understanding of yourself, your community and your physical environment?
16. Have you heard the terms “dominicanos ausente” and “dominicanyork/yol”? In what context have you heard them before? And how do you feel about these terms?

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